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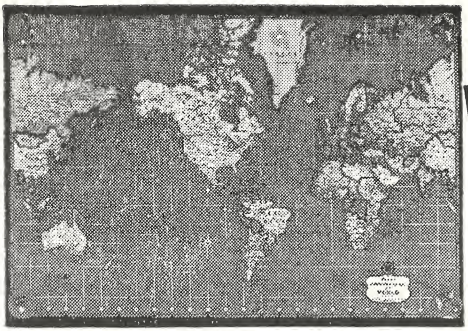

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THE FIGHT WITH THE GORGON

by ROBERT SILVERBERG

illustrated by EMSH

The strange monster had some extraordinary powers. So it had to be fought by extraordinary means, or all of us would be dead men — turned into cold, hard stone!

OUR troubles started the moment the stiffened corpse of Flaherty was found, standing frozen in a field half a kilometer from the ship. Nobody in the crew had cared very much for the big Irishman—but still, finding his body, completely unharmed, stock-still and standing alone, was quite a jolt.

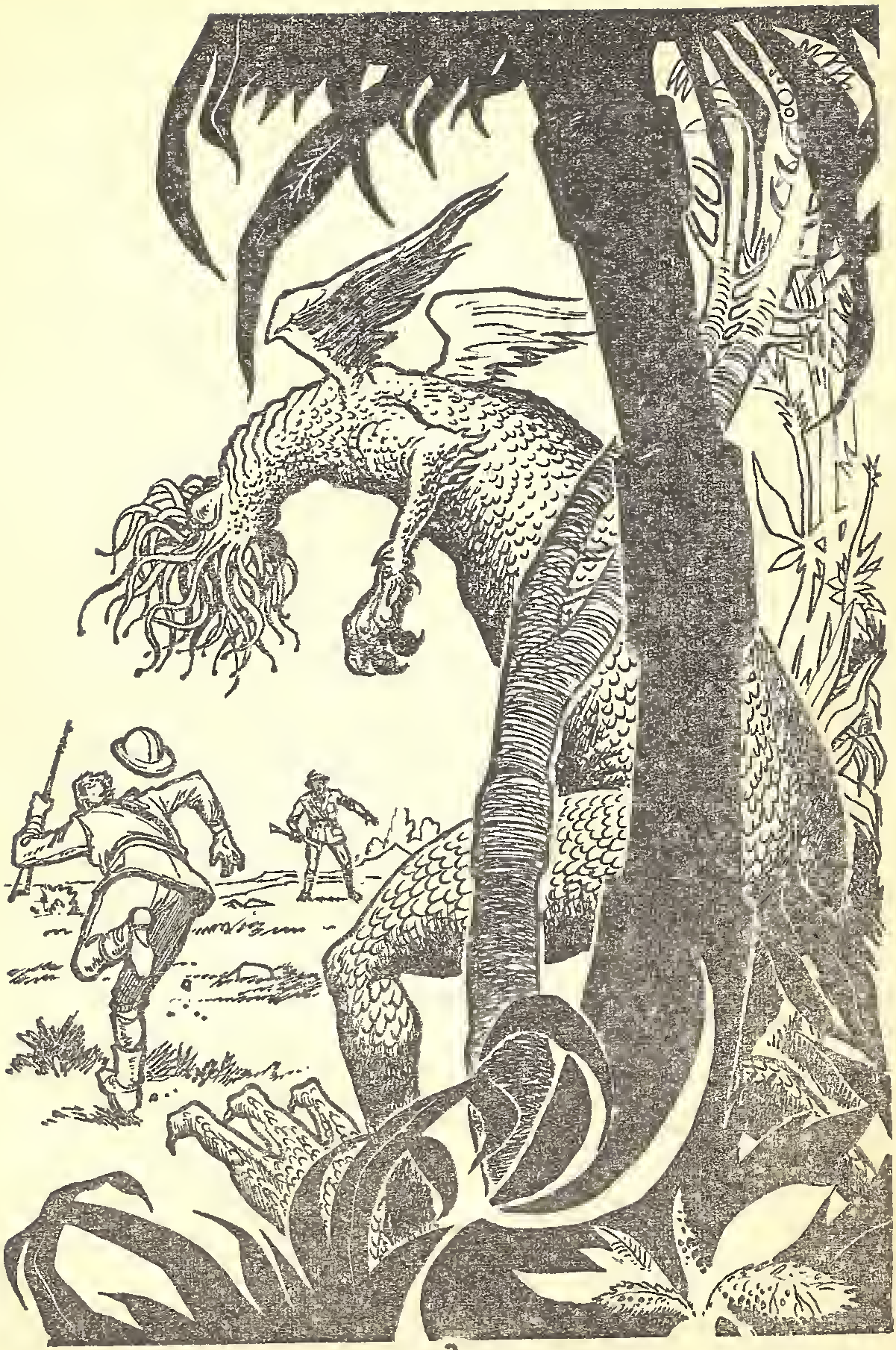
There was no apparent sign of death. In fact, at first we thought he was asleep on his feet. Horses sleep that way. Why not Flaherty?

But he wasn't asleep. He was dead, dead as could be. And when there are only eight human beings on an unexplored planet, and one of those eight happens to die suddenly of unknown causes, the framework of your existence tends to sag a bit. We were scared.

"We" being the first Earth Exploratory Party, Type A-7, to the planet Bellatrix IV in Orion. Eight men, altogether, charged with the job of bringing back a full report on the whole planet.

Eight, of whom one, ox-like Flaherty, was stiff as a board before us.

Tavy Ramirez, our geologist,



asked, "What did it to him, Joel?"

"How the blazes do I know?" I snapped. I regretted losing my temper right away. "Sorry, Tavy. But I know as much as you do about the whole thing. Flaherty's dead, and there's something out there that killed him."

"But there's *nothing* out there," protested the biologist, Kal Framer. "For three days we've hunted up and down and haven't found a sign of animal life. Not a sign."

Jonathan Morro, botanist, unwound his six-feet-eight and stretched. "Maybe an intelligent plant did him in, eh, Kaftan?"

I shook my head. "Doubt it, Jon. No sign of violence, no vegetation in the vicinity. We found him standing in the middle of a field, on his two big feet, frozen dead. Doesn't figure."

Over in the corner of the cabin, Steeger—medical officer—was puttering around the corpse. Steeger was an older man than most of us, one who had literally rotted in the service. He had contracted frogpox on Fomalhaut II, and now he wore two chrome-jacketed titanium legs.

I looked over at him and said, "You have any report to make yet, Doc?"

Steeger turned watery eyes toward me. "There's no sign of any physical harm, Joel. But his muscles are all tensed, as if—as if—well, I can't put it into words. He seems to have been frozen in his tracks by some strange force. I can't explain it."

Phil Janus, our chronicler, looked up from the chess game he'd been playing with pilot Curt Holden and laughed. "Maybe he had an overdose of his own joy-juice and it hardened all his arteries."

That was a reference to the crude still Flaherty had rigged the day we landed on Bellatrix IV. His duties as navigator had kept the big fellow pretty busy all trip, but first day down-planet he had managed to get right at the business of building the still.

He hadn't said a word about it to anyone, but when he showed up at mess that night he was pretty high, and we knew what he'd done. We never found his still, though we

searched all over. The second day Phil Janus had come across a liter flask of whiskey, home-brewed, and his sampling had cost him a black eye when Flaherty caught him.

"Let's be serious a minute," Framer said. "One of our group is dead, and we don't know what killed him. There's something out there that Flaherty crossed. I move we organize a searching party to find out what."

"Seconded," murmured Morro.

I looked at the corpse for a moment, then at the six men around me. Framer was my solid man, I knew, the leader of the group. Morro was strong, too, but usually too bored to bother with the welfare of the group. Young Holden, the pilot, was a follower; he didn't have any thoughts of his own, or at least he never expressed any. Tavy Ramirez I knew: quiet, smiling, unassuming—not very strong a person. Doc Steeger was small, frightened, not at all the sort of man you'd expect would go gallivanting around space as part of an exploratory crew. Janus was like Morro in many ways: he just didn't care. And Flaherty, thank the Lord, was dead. The big ox had threatened nasty incidents many times. He'd been a constant source of dissension on ship.

As for me—Joel Kaftan, Lieut. (Spatial)—I was scared. Visible monsters on a planet are bad enough; invisible ones are hell. I looked out the port and saw the vast, empty, tree-studded plain that was our chunk of Bellatrix IV, and looked back at the men.

"All in favor of a searching party, say aye!"

AYE it was, and we divided up. There were seven of us, now, and that made things awkward. Steeger, as our doctor, was indispensable—and he was no use outdoors anyway. Theoretically Holden was dispensable—in a pinch I could probably have piloted the ship myself—but I would have hated to try, and so I confined him to quarters too. That left just five men for the search.

The logical way to do it would have been to split into two groups, one of three men and one of two. But I suppose I wasn't thinking too clearly

just then. I wanted to cover the maximum possible ground. So I announced that there would be *three* groups. I didn't figure that one poor chap would have to go out alone.

I teamed up with Ramirez, and Framer with Morro. That left Janus as a searching party of one.

Janus didn't mind. Phil rarely minded anything.

"Looks like I'm lone wolf," he said. "Okay, gentlemen. If you hear a loud silence from my neck of the woods, run like hell."

We opened the airlock—not really necessary, since Bellatrix IV conveniently had an Earthtype atmosphere—and we left.

Tavy and I struck out for the site of Flaherty's finish. We didn't say much. We were both kind of numb. When your lifespan is 150 years or so, and you've got more than a hundred of them left, you're not too anxious to die young, even as a hero on an alien planet.

Framer and Morro wandered up toward the big ridge behind the spaceship. Janus headed for the clump of twisted red-leaved trees about two hundred meters away.

Tavi and I moved slowly, looking around in every direction. As usual, there was no sign of any animal life. Bellatrix IV had an abundance of plants, not chlorophyll-based but with some sort of iron-compound base, a temperate climate, and flowing streams of real H_2O water. But no visible animals. Of course, we hadn't covered very much territory yet, no more than two or three square kilometers.

No one dared to make a sound. Then suddenly, in about two seconds flat, we had our first encounter with Bellatrician life.

We saw poor Janus come racing out of the woods—and lumbering behind him out of nowhere came a bizarre thing about ten feet high, with little flapping non-functional wings, gleaming golden scales, and a headful of writhing, pencil-like tentacles.

We stood transfixed for a moment. I snapped out of my shock, drew my rifle, and put a shot into the scales, without causing any apparent disturbance to the beast. And then

Janus turned and stared right up at the beast for a fraction of a second as he ran.

It was a mistake.

The beast stared back at him, and the frantic pursuit came to an end. They glared at each other for just a moment. Then the monster seemed to lose interest in the chase. It wheeled and ran off in the opposite direction. Within moments it had disappeared over the hill.

But Janus remained where he was, frozen dead.

WE planted our second corpse and gathered morosely in the cabin of our ship, a scared and dismal bunch. We missed Flaherty, just a bit, but not very much. Janus, though, genial, clever, enormously capable—it was hard to believe he was dead, killed by a gorgon.

Gorgon it was. There was no doubt that the beast of the forest was a gorgon, straight out of the old mythology. Doc Steeger had given us the first inkling when he pointed out that the deaths of both Flaherty and Janus had been caused by a sudden neural blast.

Framer looked up. "But we didn't see any physical contact between Phil and the monster."

"No," Ramirez added. "Janus just looked at the thing, and then he froze stiff—"

The explanation must have hit Morro and myself at just about the same instant.

"Gorgon," I said.

"Gorgon," he echoed, a split-second later. He stood up and peered out at the wide plain with its deadly clump of trees off to the side. "A gorgon."

There was a moment of silence. Then Holden said, "If you'll pardon me, sir—just exactly what *is* a gorgon? I don't remember hearing about them at the Academy."

Framer muttered something under his breath. I knew he had a vivid scorn for modern methods of specialized education. It was Morro who spoke.

"A gorgon, Curt, is a mythological beast. It killed by a glance; if you looked at its eyes, you were turned to stone. And the thing outside is almost a living version of a gorgon, complete to the tentacles on its head. The original gorgon was supposed to have living snakes instead of hair."

Holden said nothing, but his eyes widened.

Ramirez scratched his neck uneasily. "Gorgon, is it? Joel, how do we deal with *that?*"

"The same way Perseus did," I said.

And so Operation Medusa got under way. It needed some preliminary discussion. For one thing, Holden, who as our most experienced technician was vital to the plan, had not the slightest knowledge of the Perseus myth, and so we had to fill him in on it.

Morro patiently did most of the explaining.

"A Greek hero named Perseus boasted he could kill Medusa, the gorgon," Morro said, smothering a yawn. "With the help of the gods he got a pair of magic sandals which enabled him to fly, and a cap of invisibility. Then he polished his shield to mirror brightness and swooped down on the gorgon, watching her in his mirror-shield. And without ever looking her in the face he cut off her head."

"I see," Holden said. "We have to hunt down this gorgon too, and we can't look at it either, or—" He nodded meaningfully at the two brown mounds of earth outside the ship.

"Right," Framer said. "But we don't have a mirror. And we can't build one. What now?"

We racked our brains. Morro wondered if we could somehow polish the ship to the proper brightness, but the scheme was impractical.

"Try radar," Ramirez offered finally.

"That's it!" I whooped "Hunt down the gorgon with radar and blast it without ever looking at the damned thing!"

That was our plan. Medusa's number was up. But I suspected she wouldn't go down without a fight.

HOLDEN had the radar screen dismantled and set up for gorgon-hunting in no time at all. The boy's horizons were limited, maybe, but in the fields for which he had been educated he was tops.

We set out on our gorgon-hunt. It was a warm, summery day.

Wherever we looked, redness greeted our eyes. The trees had red leaves and the grass was

a carpet of red. Bellatrix IV was one huge plain, it seemed, covered with a bloody carpet.

Steeger remained behind on ship, peering intently into the radar screen. The other five of us fanned out slowly. We were well armed. That didn't keep us from feeling terrified. I had visions of myself being borne back to the ship, frozen, to share that impromptu graveyard with Janus and Flaherty.

Steeger had more to worry about than any of us. Hunched over the radar scope, his job was to relay instructions to us. We knew the gorgon was somewhere in the copse, because Framer had seen the great beast go thundering into the clump of trees the day before, and no one had seen it come out. But only a fool would go in there after a creature that could kill with a glance.

Slowly, painfully, the five of us formed a wide circle around the copse, standing no closer than a hundred meters from the edge. Not one of us dared to look up, of course. Our eyes were fixed on the blood-red grass and Steeger directed us to our positions, step by painful step. It took half an hour to form the circle, as Doc would tell first one, then another of us, to move a couple of steps to right or left.

Finally the circle was complete. Five Perseuses, frightened green.

Then came the toughest part, as we waited for the attack. When the call came over the phones from Steeger, I was going to hurl a Johnson flare into the copse, and, if all went right, the gorgon would come lumbering out. Without looking, we would fire.

It was a pretty harebrained scheme. So many things could have gone wrong that it's a wonder we ever went ahead with it.

Doc gave the signal, and I drew back my arm and flung the flare, automatically looking up as I did. For one horror-stricken second I feared the gorgon might approach just as I looked up. It didn't.

Then all hell broke loose in the copse.

A Johnson flare goes off like a lithium bomb—at least, it's pretty damned bright. That copse lit up bright yellow, and I caught the odd contrast between the red of the leaves and

the yellow of the light. And I saw something huge thrashing around in the heart of the copse before I jerked my head down. I forced myself to stare at the ground.

An awful ten seconds passed, seeming like days. I grew progressively more numb with fear, until I passed the point of fright and became almost fatalistically calm. Nothing happened, though the flare continued to kick up a powerful light. I heard rustling noises in the copse.

And then all at once I heard Steeger's tinny yell in my phones:

"Joel!"

In the same instant I drew with my right hand and flung my left hand behind my neck, forcing my head down. I aimed the blaster up at a 45-degree angle and began sizzling away for all I was worth. I could hear Morro doing the same over to my left.

There was the sound of thunder, as of a great beast pounding the ground near me. I could hear Steeger screaming something in my phones, but I was unable to stop yelling myself. And I didn't dare look up.

For all I knew the gorgon was standing right over me and bending to bite me in two. But I had passed the point of any coherent reasoning. I was still screaming and squeezing the trigger of the burned-out blaster five minutes later, when Morro and Framer came over to me and led me back to the ship.

WE had killed it, then. And I was Perseus.

"We thought we'd never get you up," Morro said.

Steeger said, "I saw that gorgon come out, and I yelled to you. You started waving the blaster around, and Morro came over too. But by the time he reached you, you had blasted Medusa in the neck and pretty near cut that head right off.

Ramirez took up the story. "You were still blasting away without looking, even though the gorgon had fallen on its face. Holden came up and cut its head off, but it's still thrashing its wings out there."

I looked up. The accumulated tension had built up to such a pitch while I was waiting for the thing to come out of its lair

that I felt I had been through a wringer and squeezed flat. I looked around at the men ranging the couch on which I lay.

I saw Morro standing at my feet, and old Steeger looking even older after his remote-control chess-game with the gorgon. And there was Holden, and Ramirez. Four. And I made five. Two dead made seven. It took me another second to realize we were not all together.

"Where's Framer?"

"Out there," Ramirez said. "He's examining the gorgon."

"But you said the wings were still thrashing," I yelled, leaping up. "That means—"

They realized what it meant, too, and we raced through the airlock door together.

We were too late, of course.

We found the biologist bent over the decapitated gorgon, examining the head with interest. He was frozen stiff.

Averting our eyes, we carried Kal back to the ship and buried him next to Flaherty and Janus. More than any of us, Kal had been a scientist, and he hadn't been able to resist trying to solve the puzzle of the gorgon. Whether he had or not we would never know. The gorgon's neural network had been of a low order, low enough to remain functioning for a while after the organism's death.

There had been enough of a charge left in those deadly eyes to give Framer a freezing blast.

I directed operations from the door of the ship. Ramirez and Morro crept up blindfolded and slipped the gorgon's head into a thick plasticanvas bag, and zipped up the top. We sealed it and stuck a "*danger—do not open*" sign on it.

Medusa had cost us three men, but we had beaten her. We loaded her headless corpse into the deep freeze for Earth's scientists to puzzle over. We were glad to see it out of sight. No more monsters, we thought; the expedition would be a breeze from here on out.

Until the next day, when Ramirez found that Sphinx crouching near the ship—

THE END

THE PAINTED GHOST

by RICHARD R. SMITH

illustrated by EMSH

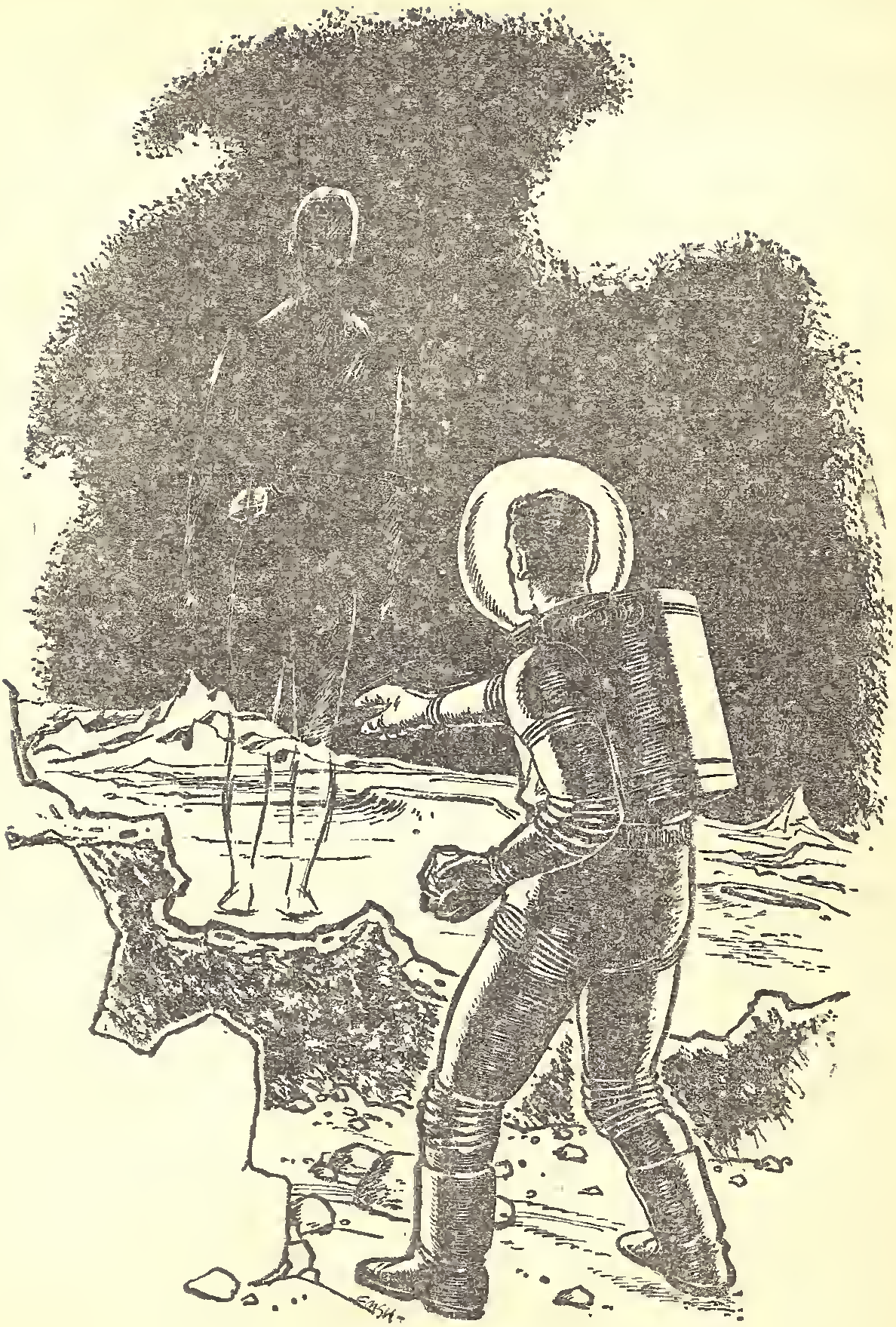
A being made of pure energy, a being you could throw a stone right through without hurting it. Such was an inhabitant of Ceres. How then to communicate with it?

THE human race makes a mistake now and then. The classic example, I suppose, is Columbus. Everyone thought he was crazy when he said the world was round.

Sam Weeks was like Columbus in a way. He had a theory and everyone would have laughed but, unlike Columbus, he didn't tell anyone.

To understand how it happened, you'll have to remember how it was in those days. Space travel had just been perfected and mankind had gone wild with its new power. We had explored Mars and although they were a dying race, we had learned numerous things from the Martians. At the height of their civilization, they had developed a technology of machines with incredibly few moving parts and radioactive alloys sensitive to thought-waves. We had adapted the technology to our own purposes and profited tremendously. After that incentive, we went on to Arcturus and discovered evidence of a dead race. Almost every week an archaeologist on Arcturus uncovered a device such as an antigravity machine or a matter-converter.

Every government on Earth was spending every dollar it could on the construction of spaceships and exploration of outer space. And everywhere mankind went, it hoped to find another civilization similar to



the Martians or the Arcturians.

Then someone got the bright idea we should explore our own back yard before we went too deep in space. And we landed on Ceres in the asteroid belt and found the— Well, I don't think they were ever given a scientific name. If they were, I never heard it. We called them *Ghosts* because they looked like ghosts.

Our survey team studied them for a month and it was an interesting month to say the least. The Ghosts, we discovered, didn't have physical substance. Instead, their bodies were composed of energy and it was the energy that gave them the shimmering, ghostlike appearance. They were sentient. That is, they could think and they moved about under their own volition.

None of those discoveries startled us. Anyone who traveled in space had to meet certain prerequisites and one of the main prerequisites was imagination. We had learned through trial and error that a man without it was a handicap in outer space. Some people can't understand how a low imagination ratio cuts down a man's reflexes, but I know. On Mars I saw a man stare at a *Schkal*—one of the weirdest animals alive—and say over and over, "It can't be!" Before he convinced himself the danger was real and raised his rifle, the *Schkal* killed him.

So all the men on our team were hand-picked; with a high imagination ratio. Nothing about the Ghosts startled us except one thing: they didn't do anything and they had nothing.

THEY had no buildings, machines, art, science or *anything*. They didn't sleep, but if they had slept, they would have slept right out in the open on Ceres' surface. One of the anthropologists told me it was due to their physiology. They didn't eat anything (They absorbed sunlight and it was food to them as sunlight is food to a plant), and because they didn't eat as we do, they didn't need an agriculture or anything related to an agriculture.

Nothing could harm them because of their nature and they didn't need shelters or weapons or any of the million

and one things that protect a creature from physical harm. They were, as far as we could tell, ageless and without disease. So they didn't need a science of medicine or any of the implements of that science.

And they didn't do anything. In the first place, I suppose, they didn't have anything to do anything with. In the second place, they— Well, anyway, they just walked around and outside of walking around, they apparently didn't do anything.

During breakfast one day, a cosmologist in our team explained how the Ghosts evolved. I didn't understand nine-tenths of it, but he had an elaborate theory that they had been created at the origin of the universe and had evolved slowly during billions of years. He said that the Ghosts' life-form was actually less complicated than a star's structure.

"If they're so simple," I said, "why don't we find them all over the galaxy?"

He said that Earth's oceans contain life-forms fewer in number than more complicated forms on Earth's surface and I let the argument drop right there. Scientists have a habit of changing the subject and when you try to argue about one thing, you find yourself arguing about a dozen other things.

Complicated or simple, the Ghosts were the most interesting race we'd ever found. And the most useless. As I said before, this was in the days when mankind was exploring outer space and anxious to find alien civilizations.

But the Ghosts didn't do anything and they had nothing. So how could mankind benefit by studying them? They didn't have any science so no matter how long we studied them, we'd never uncover anything useful such as the antigravity machine we'd found on Arcturus or the thought-reactive alloy on Mars.

But when we radioed the information back to Earth, the Wheels decided we should learn more about the Ghosts even if they didn't have anything to offer. After all, they said, the Ghosts were a *completely* alien race and mankind should, in one way or another, benefit from a closer study.

Weeks, our linguist, stepped into the picture then. He volunteered to stay on Ceres and find a way to communicate with the Ghosts. And I volunteered to help him. I'm not a scientists but I'm a "Maintenance First Class" which is, more or less, a glorified Mechanic. I can take an interstellar radio apart and put it back together again. I can repair an oxygenating machine and almost any machine ever made except a spaceship's hyperdrive. And while Weeks stayed on Ceres and studied the Ghosts, he'd be dependent on the machines around him and would need a maintenance man.

Everyone on the survey team helped construct our quarters. They called them "quarters" but I called them *cubbyholes*: they were small compartments beneath Ceres' surface...compartments barely large enough to live in. And, I remember, everyone worked hard. They were anxious to leave Ceres; anxious to go deep in space where they'd have a chance to become rich and famous by finding an alien civilization.

And they were anxious to leave the creatures that looked exactly like ghosts.

I spent most of the first month admiring the scenery. Ceres itself is nothing but a barren planetoid 485 miles in diameter but its surroundings comprise one of the most awe-inspiring sights in the universe.

Located in the asteroid belt, Ceres is surrounded by millions of asteroids ranging in size from Pallas which is 304 miles in diameter to the smallest asteroids only a few feet in diameter.

Against a backdrop of star-filled space and reflecting sunlight, they look like a million hurtling moons of all sizes. Any object on Ceres' surface has at least a dozen shadows—shadows that keep changing and the planetoid is a world of silence and shifting light and darkness.

Weeks studied the Ghosts. As I said before, they walked and— Well, not exactly *walked* since they didn't have legs but they kept moving and Weeks chased them like a guy chasing butterflies with a net. He flashed lights of various intensities at them, focused radio

beams on them and exposed them to radioactive rays and various gases. At times he even threw rocks at them. All in the hope that something would get a reaction from them.

If, for instance, the Ghosts reacted to electrical impulses of a certain intensity, he could have used that as a basic symbol and based a language on it. He told me once that if the Ghosts had reacted to a particular size of rock or substance passing through their bodies at a particular speed, he could have based a language on that and communicated with them by throwing rocks of various sizes at them. I never did figure out if he was pulling my leg or not.

But no matter what he did, he didn't make any progress and he told me once it was driving him crazy. "I'm a linguist," he said. "My job is to communicate with aliens. I've studied it and related fields all my life. But these...*these things!* They don't do anything. Their existence has no purpose, so how can you communicate with them? How can you communicate with something when you have *nothing* in common with it?"

I had my own theory. I decided that the Ghosts were sentient but stupid. We had seen no evidence that the Ghosts were intelligent, and how can you communicate with a creature if it's too stupid to understand?

But one day Weeks was lucky and a Ghost followed him into our underground quarters. And it didn't come through the air-lock while it was open. Weeks came in first, closed the door and then the Ghost followed him. It came through three inches of steel just like a ghost would.

Then Weeks went wild. He studied the Ghost day after day, working twenty four hours a day at times. He analyzed it until his notes resembled a small library and he did everything but stand on his head in an effort to communicate with it. And the Ghost just stood there, day after day, patient-like as if it had nothing better to do than let Weeks examine it.

I asked Weeks if I could do anything to help him and he said he didn't know exactly

what to do himself and he couldn't very well tell me what to do. So I just sat around and watched Weeks and the Ghost.

It was approximately five feet tall and three feet wide. It kept changing its shape and size so Weeks gave up trying to measure its exact size. At times it was transparent, almost invisible, and other times opaque. And it changed color like a chameleon. If you held a shoe before it, it changed color until its whole body was the same shade of brown. If you held a red object before it, it matched the color perfectly. And, as Weeks proved, it could match any wave length in the visible spectrum between 3,000 and 8,000 angstroms.

But I couldn't imagine how the Ghost did it and I asked Weeks, "How can something without physical substance change color?"

He hesitated before he explained and I could almost see the wheels working inside his head as he decided to give it to me in layman's terms.

"It's simple," he said. He held a piece of green cloth before the Ghost, and the Ghost changed to the same shade of green. "This cloth is green. Right? It's green because its physical substance has a quality that reflects light of a green wave length. The wave length...the angstrom units pass through space and reach the retina of your eye and register as green when the message is relayed to your brain. But the color itself, as it passes through space, has no physical substance. As it passes through space, it's a wave length, angstrom units, energy. And the Ghost can duplicate forms of energy. It duplicates the *energy* of green rather than the substance of the cloth. Its body *is* energy and it does it the same way one of us would flex a muscle."

I said, "Uh huh."

But it didn't end there. We discovered later that the Ghost could duplicate sounds. I didn't ask Weeks how the Ghost did that, but he told me anyway. I don't remember his exact words but he said something about sound being a form of energy also and something about sound consisting of wave lengths of vibrations as they passed through space.

AT this point, Weeks was wild with joy and kept saying things like, "My name is Weeks." And then he would hold up his hand and say, "Hand." And then hold up a book and say, "Book." And the Ghost caught on. After a few times, when he held up the book again, the Ghost said, "Book." And when he held up his hand and wiggled his fingers, the Ghost said, "Hand."

Weeks was fascinated, but, more than anything else, I was amused. It's a weird sight to see a man talking to something that resembles a ghost and it standing there, repeating everything like a parrot.

Weeks pointed at the Ghost and said, "Ghost."

The Ghost said, "Ghost."

Weeks pointed at himself and said, "Man."

The Ghost said, "Man."

I said, "Polly wants a cracker. *Aaarrk!*"

The Ghost said, "Polly wants a cracker. *Aaarrk!*"

I laughed so hard tears ran down my cheeks. The thing sounded just like a parrot!

I said, "Avast there, ye blarsted landlubber!"

"Avast there, ye blarsted landlubber! Polly wants a cracker. *Aaarrk!* Ghost. Book. Hand. Man."

I laughed so hard my sides began to hurt. I laughed until Weeks slapped my face.

"You stupid fool! Making fun of a creature ten times more intelligent than we are. Making fun of a—"

I stopped him right there. I grabbed him by the collar and shook him so hard his glasses fell to the floor. I didn't say anything. I didn't have to say anything. Weeks is a pale little guy with enough strength to fight his way out of a paper bag but he'd be exhausted when he got out. It was the first time he'd ever done anything like that and he knew from my expression what I'd do if he ever did anything like it again.

We didn't apologize to each other, but we both felt sorry about the incident and it took us awhile to forget it. In the meanwhile, the Ghost became even more interesting. The Ghosts, as I said before, couldn't be harmed. Any object passed through them as if passing through a fog. But, we discovered, a Ghost could

polarize a section of its energy if it wanted to *touch* something.

Weeks held the book in front of the Ghost so long and kept saying "Book" so often that the Ghost became interested and one day it *took* the book and started turning pages with tentacle-like extensions of its body. When we touched the extensions, they felt cold but *solid* and Weeks found out by experiment that any polarization by a Ghost had a reflexive protection system.

The system is basically simple but can only be explained by illustration. If, for instance, a man burns his finger, his nervous system works automatically, reflexively, and relays messages to the proper muscles in his arm to withdraw the finger from the source of pain.. And the Ghosts' protection system was identical in function.

If a Ghost, for instance, was on Ceres' surface and polarized a section of its energy and a meteor struck the solidified area, it wouldn't be harmed. Instead, the reflexive system would depolarize the area at the *microsecond* of contact and the meteor would pass through it.

It was almost unbelievable. The Ghosts were invulnerable. They could touch anything, but nothing could touch them unless they wanted it to touch them.

SHORTLY after that, we received a message over the radio that war had been declared against the Antarians. And as a Reserve Officer, I received notice that my unit had been activated. I left for Earth on the next supply ship and soon found myself aboard another ship headed for Antares.

I had always thought that an interstellar war would be fought with spaceships and atomic bombs. I discovered differently. There's a lot more men in a civilization than spaceships and atomic bombs and I spent three years fighting from city to city on Antares while the Antarians and our men threw spaceships and atomic bombs at each other in outer space.

During that time, I heard only two things about Weeks and the Ghosts. Both of those I saw in old newspapers while

resting in foxholes. One was an item about Weeks' wife. He was 4F and had continued his research on Ceres. His wife, a gorgeous blue-eyed blonde, evidently had too many lonely nights back on Earth. She divorced him and remarried.

And later I read that Weeks had failed to communicate with the Ghosts. I felt sorry for Weeks when I read that. He had tried hard; had worked on the project like a fanatic. But I wasn't surprised that he failed. Nothing had changed my opinion that the Ghosts were stupid. A parrot can also repeat, "Avast there, ye blarsted landlubber," but he doesn't know what it means.

THE war ended and I was shipped back to Earth and discharged. I was happily adjusting to civilian life again and had forgotten all about Weeks when I answered the door one day and there he was, grinning from ear to ear.

He said, "Hello, Ed."

I didn't recognize him at first. Instead of being the homely guy I remembered, his features had changed. His nose was smaller, his chin was larger, and a dozen other things about his face had changed... all small changes so he had the same general appearance but all *right* changes so he was now handsome. Some surgeon had done a marvelous plastic surgery job.

Our conversation rambled while we reminisced about the experiences we'd had together and brought each other up to date on what we had done and were doing.

Then I brought the conversation around to the Ghosts. "I was sorry to hear you didn't communicate with the Ghosts," I said. "You certainly tried hard enough."

"That's why I came to see you," he said. "To tell you the truth and make an offer. The truth is—I *did* communicate with the Ghosts."

I didn't say anything but my astonishment must have shown on my face.

"I did," he repeated.

"I don't believe it."

He lit a cigarette and explained, "Remember how the Ghosts could duplicate sound and light and any form of energy? When I analyzed them more closely, I learned they

could duplicate *thought*. Thoughts are a form of energy—electrical impulses traveling through the networks of our minds. I'm not telepathic but they learned to project thoughts and receive my thoughts. They can—"

"You mean," I asked dazedly, "that the Ghosts are intelligent?"

He nodded his head. "Very much so."

I mixed some drinks—strong ones—and handed him one. I wasn't sure if he was pulling my leg or not, but I decided to go along with him for awhile. "If the Ghosts are intelligent," I asked, "why don't they *do* something?"

He sipped his drink. "That's hard for us to understand, but it makes sense in their case. They are, more or less, like a man who stands on the bank of a river and watches the river go by. The man wouldn't jump in the river and try to stop it or change its course. And it would be just as foolish for the Ghosts to interfere with events that take place around them. They would have no reason; nothing to gain. They spend their lives in activities so completely alien that it appears to us as if they do nothing."

He waited for me to make a comment, but I couldn't think of any. I had seen the Ghosts and their parrot-like ability to copy colors and sounds. I had always thought of them as brainless creatures and now Weeks claimed they were intelligent. So what? If a race is so alien that you haven't anything in common with it, who cares if it's intelligent?

"Have you ever had any queer dreams?" Weeks inquired.

I nodded my head but before I could ask what dreams had to do with the Ghosts on Ceres, he went on, "Especially when you're a kid. When you're a kid you might dream you're Santa Claus and you keep all the toys for yourself, or you might dream you're Superman, or you might dream you're flying through the air. I had a queer dream when I was a kid. I dreamed that I was a painted ghost."

"Huh?"

"Painted ghost," he repeated. "I didn't know what it meant at the time, but I had

the same dream on Ceres after the Ghosts started to duplicate colors and I analyzed it the next day."

He leaned forward in his chair and glanced around the room as if to make sure we were alone. "Dreaming you're a painted ghost is the same as dreaming you're Superman," he said. "A ghost can't be hurt ...nothing can hurt a ghost. They're not physical. But the trouble with being a ghost is that no one sees it...no one knows it's there. On the other hand, a *painted* ghost would be seen. A ghost painted the color of flesh could walk in a crowd and not be noticed as being anything different than a man. And yet nothing could ever hurt it."

He convinced me that he was either drunk or crazy. And it didn't seem likely he could have gotten drunk so soon.

He rose and walked about the room as if looking for something and I wondered if I should humor him or call the police or what.

He found what he was looking for: a knife on the desk... a sharp knife I'd been using as a letter-opener.

"Watch." He placed his left hand on the desk and stabbed it with the knife.

His hand vanished before the knife struck it...

...and reappeared when he withdrew the knife.

Then his face changed as I watched. His nose became smaller; his lips became fuller and reddened while his hair grew longer until it reached his shoulders. A dozen other changes took place until the grinning face was...*a woman's.*

Then he walked *through* the desk; *through* a wall and back again; walked to where I sat paralyzed in my chair and then—so close I could have reached out and touched him—he faded, vanished entirely and then reappeared.

"Seen enough?"

I nodded my head. If I had never seen the Ghosts on Ceres, the demonstration would have startled me out of my wits. But I *had* seen the Ghosts and everything he did could have been done by a Ghost. A Ghost could change its shape and color. A Ghost could pass through material objects; could—by polarization of its energy

—touch objects and—because of its reflexive protection system—a knife or *any* material object would never harm it. And, I realized numbly, one of the Ghosts on Ceres could have done anything with its peculiar life-form. The truth had been there before my eyes all the time and I had watched the Ghosts day after day without seeing the truth.

"You're a— You're a *Ghost?*"

The face changed until it was once again Weeks'. "I'm a Ghost," he said. "A painted ghost."

I don't remember exactly what he said after that. I suppose I was too numb to understand everything. But I remember he explained how he communicated with the Ghosts and told them he wanted to be one of them. And *they*—I don't think he told me how they did it—*they* made him like them.

It's simple, Weeks said, once you get used to the idea. He said he doesn't have a body but when he wants one, he only has to concentrate. Using the energy is like using new muscles and he learned how to polarize, shape, and color it. Energy is a universal tool, he said, and anything can be done with energy.

And just before Weeks left, he invited me to join him. The Ghosts had changed him and at his request had agreed to change another human to their life-form. They w o u l d n ' t change everyone who might want to be changed but as a favor to Weeks, they would change *one* more human so he'd have a—not a human, but an *ex*-human companion.

And Weeks... Weeks said I was his best friend, so I had first chance. If I wanted, I could become a Ghost.

He wrote down his address and said I could think it over and let him know.

An invitation to become a Ghost! Only one thing would be more fantastic: an invitation to become a ghost of the haunted house variety rather than one of the life-form that lives on Ceres.

But, as Weeks said, there would be a lot of advantages. Nothing can harm a Ghost. A Ghost can go anywhere, do anything.

I'm still thinking it over. There would be a lot of advan-

tages, but it's the little things that worry me. A million little things and I wonder how I'd feel with all those little things changed...I wonder if the advantages are equal to all the little things...

For instance, I brush my teeth every morning. How would I *feel* when I woke up each morning and found I didn't have any teeth? How would I feel each morning when I woke up and found—as a matter of fact—I didn't have *a body?*

And— Well, anyway, there's a million little things like that.

THE END

BACK-TO-FRONT COMET

A back-to-front comet has been discovered, whose tail points toward the sun instead of away from it, as most comet's tails do. An explanation has been put forward to account for the topsy-turvy behavior of this cosmic freak.

Fred L. Whipple of the Smithsonian Institution's Astrophysical Observatory suggests that the comet, which is named Arend-Roland, is probably a brand new comet which has never before visited the solar system (most comets operate on vast orbits which bring them into our stellar vicinity in periods ranging from every few years to once every several hundred centuries.) The pressure of the sun's light is generally assumed to push a comet's tail away from its direction.

But, theorizes Whipple, Arend-Roland may still have a feathery mantle of ice-crystals never before touched by a sun's heat

As the comet draws near the sun, heat penetrates this mantle, vaporizing it; jets of steam shoot in the sun's direction, for the jets would be stronger than the pressure of the sun's light.

THE UNTOUCHABLES

by CALVIN M. KNOX

NOVELETTE *illustrated by* BOWMAN

It takes all kinds of planets, all kinds of customs to make a universe. — But who would have believed the odd reason behind Dyrain's rigid and inhuman caste system?

THE planet was a sort of half-way house, lying in the vaguely-defined neutral zone between the warring spheres of influence of Earth and Deneb. Its name was Dyrain. It was Earthtype, inhabited by intelligent alien beings, and was a favorite tourist-world for well-heeled Terran travellers.

It was also the center of a Denebian spy-chain.

At least, that was the way it looked to Terra Intelligence, and that was how Lloyd Malin came to pay a visit to Dyrain.

Malin was an eight-year veteran of Terra Intelligence's outworld branch, and that meant he was just about eligible for a pension; he was one of less than half a dozen men who had survived eight years of the job and still came back for more. He had been doing a job on Canopus VII, where the mean temperature was 110 in the shade and the gravity better than 1.5 Earthnorm, when he received a subspace communication telling him to turn over the Canopus job to another staff man and report at once for reassignment to Dyrain.

All in all, Special Agent Malin felt pretty good about the transfer. He was trained not to care what sort of environment his work took him to—but still, it was only human to prefer a balmy vacation-world to one where sweat

ran in rivers down a man and it was a struggle just to walk down the street.

The instructions did not say "report to Dyrain." They said "report to Earth Central for reassignment to Dyrain," and so Malin boarded a starship heading to Earth from Canopus VII, and four weeks later had made his landing. He went immediately to Earth Central, the nerve-center of Terra Intelligence: a squat, chunky, archaic building in the downtown section of Milwaukee.

The door screened him and admitted him. He was met by a tall man in the uniform of the Terran Military Forces who conducted him up the gravshaft into the main offices of Intelligence. Most of the faces were new; it was two years since Malin had last been here, or anywhere else on Earth, and in that time a great many personnel transfers had taken place.

One member of the staff had not changed, though. That was OMNIVAC — General Omnivac, some of the officers called him. The sprawling, many-levelled computer who served as master control force for the unnumbered galaxy-wide tentacles of Terra Intelligence.

Malin was conveyed into a private cubicle that had direct access to the speech chambers of OMNIVAC. There he was left, in a glass-walled room, alone with the speaker-grid that connected with the complex mind far below him in the depths of the building.

THE computer's astonishingly human voice said, "I've received your report on the Canopus situation, Malin. You did a good job there."

"Thank you, sir." Like everyone else in Terra Intelligence, Malin had come by now to regard the great synthetic brain as a human being. It was easier on the nerves to personify OMNIVAC that way.

"I've pulled you off the Canopus job for several reasons. One was that the probability was overwhelming that you'd be detected within the next several months. I didn't want to lose you so fast."

"I took every precaution to keep my identity hidden, sir."

"Naturally. But the prob-

ability was building. There was a slip somewhere, and I don't mean to imply that you committed any errors. It's simply that we've been suffering tremendous information leaks. The Denebians are finding out too many of our supposedly secret plans."

Malin remained silent, staring at the enamelled speaker grid. In his mind's eye he held a mental image of the computer—as a youngish general, with clipped hair, a stubby mustache, cold iron-gray eyes.

The computer went on, "We've narrowed the vector of this spy-leak considerably. We think it's centering on Dyrain. Naturally, since Dyrain is a neutral planet, we have to exercise great discretion in our investigations. If a Terran investigator should be uncovered on Dyrain, the Denebians would have a powerful propaganda-weapon to use against us in winning the affection of other neutral worlds throughout the galaxy."

"I understand, sir. It's risky to do any spying on a neutral world."

"Of course. On the other hand, we can't afford to allow this spy-chain to continue in operation. We'll have to take certain risks if we're going to smash it—you see that, don't you, Malin?"

"Of course, sir."

"Very good. There's a spaceship leaving for Dyrain in two days, from Starport in Antarctica. It's a tourist ship, first class. We've arranged for you to be aboard. We have an entrance visa for you, all the necessary papers, a full supply of the sort of literature a tourist might be expected to carry. We've worked out a complete biography for you; it's been taped and you can pick it up hypnopedically along with any information on the planet you may need."

"Yes, sir."

"One word of caution: if you're caught, we'll have to disown you. We won't lift a finger in your defense. It has to be that way, you see—since Dyrain is a neutral world."

Malin smiled. The computer's words did not disturb him. It had always been his private feeling that an Intelligence man who got caught did

not *deserve* to be bailed out by his planet.

He simply said, "I'll do my best, sir."

THAT night Malin stayed at a residence club maintained by Terra Intelligence for agents paying short-term visits to Earth. He retired early and adjusted the hypnopedic mechanism that would feed information to him while he slept.

It murmured gently through the night. When he woke, he carried with him not only a false identity but considerable information about the planet of Dyrain.

He was now Paul O'Connor, age 35, an unmarried and fairly wealthy stockbroker, who lived in that part of Connecticut known to some as South Boston and to others as Upper New York City. He had saved up his annual vacations and now was taking a year's leave, most of which he planned to spend vacationing on Dyrain. This was his third trip into space; he had visited Sirius and Procyon on business trips—Sirius five years ago, in 2780, and Procyon two years after that.

As for Dyrain, he learned that it was an Earthtype world 8100 miles in diameter, fifth in orbit around a warm reddish-gold sun. Because of its small angle of declination from its ecliptic, it had little seasonal variation. Its polar regions were cold and impassable all the year round; most of the rest of the planet was semi-tropical in nature, with pleasant winds and not excessive humidity.

The inhabitants were humanoid and probably descended from simian stock; they were advanced enough to have developed a homogenous planetary culture whose most important facet was its rigid division into castes—an administrative caste, a priestly caste, a merchant caste, a common caste (by far the largest numerically) and an untouchable caste, pariahs who lived in absolute poverty.

The Dyrainna, as they called themselves, maintained strict neutrality in the conflict between Earth and its unruly colony on Deneb's four worlds; they allowed both Earthmen and Denebians to enter the planet as tourists, though they

steadfastly refused to permit either side to establish any kind of military or other official outpost on their soil.

Life on Dyrain was easy and gentle. The Dyrainna did not wish to involve themselves in other people's arguments. Nevertheless, it looked apparent that Dyrain was serving as a channel-point for Denebian spy couriers. Malin had the tough job of smashing the spy-ring without offending the neutrality of the Dyrainna.

It was the toughest job he had ever had, in eight years of Intelligence work. He was looking forward to it eagerly.

A day later he caught an afternoon jet for Antarctica, where Earth's biggest spaceport had been built on what had once been a useless, frozen continent. The trip took less than half an hour; he travelled aboard a hundred-seater that rose straight up, plunged two hundred miles into space, and re-entered the atmosphere over Antarctica after travelling at fantastic speeds.

The Starport covered better than a hundred square miles, but it was efficiently patrolled and Malin had no trouble finding his way to the departure deck for the Dyrain ship. He was carrying a suitcase filled with the sort of things a vacationing young stockbroker would be likely to carry—light reading, fancy clothes, and the like. Terra Intelligence had made up the suitcase for him. Like all outworld agents, Malin had no home, no personal property. He felt no need for it.

He presented the papers belonging to "Paul O'Connor" at the proper desks and was passed through; his ticket had been bought by Intelligence through an intricate four-way deal, to avoid any possibility of a trace. It entitled him to one first-class cabin aboard the starship *Song of Altair,* round trip, cost four thousand Galactic credits.

A conveyor-belt took his luggage aboard. He was told that checkdown for departure would begin in two hours, and he spent the time roaming around the spaceport, behaving as any departing tourist would. Intelligence had supplied him with ten thousand credits in trav-

ellers' checks, for him to use as expense-money.

He bought ten credits' worth of flight insurance, naming a mythical aunt in Wisconsin as his beneficiary. She would collect a hundred thousand credits if the *Song of Altair* failed to reach its destination. He browsed in the bookstore and purchased two tapes, both of them recent and trivial novels, to take with him.

His next stop was the Universe Bar, famed throughout the galaxy as a place where almost every alcoholic beverage known to the cosmos could be had—for a price. Summoning his sleep-learned knowledge of Dyrain, he called loudly for a kiezz—the fiery green wine of Dyrain.

He expected the bartender to look blankly at him and ask for a repeat, but the fame of the Universe Bar was upheld; the barkeep merely said, "Five credits," and punched out the order on the dial before him.

A moment later a crystal beaker filled with cloudy green liquid slid down the ramp and landed in front of Malin. He sipped cautiously; it was strong stuff. Around him, people were drinking the cocktails of a hundred worlds, and paying a stiff price for the privilege.

The loudspeaker boomed, "Checkdown beginning for flight to Dyrain aboard *Song of Altair*. Passengers please take their places aboard ship."

The barkeep grinned at Malin and said, "Guess that call's for you, pal. Go easy on the kiezz when you get there."

Malin winked leeringly. "If it's five credits a shot there, you bet I'll go easy!"

"Give you a tip: it's half a buck a quart there. The rest's overhead and profit. Want another before you go on board, sucker?"

Malin shook his head. "One fiver's enough, thanks. I'll wait till I get there for the next shot."

He weaved away from the bar and found the aisle that led to the departure deck. Ten minutes later he was on his way aboard the *Song of Altair*, bound for Dyrain with a full cargo of wealthy tourists. As he stepped aboard, he deliberately blotted out the identity of Lloyd Malin. From here on he

was Paul O'Connor of South Boston, out for a joyride on Dyrain.

TAKING one thing after another, Malin thought on the eighth day of the two-week cruise through hyperspace, life on a luxury interstellar liner wasn't so bad at all. The food was superb, the accommodations plush and lavish, the nightly entertainment excellent. There was a well-stocked bar aboard ship, a recreation deck, a library, a video room whose programs originated from within the ship itself. The cost of a one-way trip was twenty-five hundred credits, but you got your money's worth.

He had mingled with the crowd of tourists on board, gotten to know them fairly well. There were four hundred passengers on the giant ship. Most of them were middle-aged couples taking the big trip of their lives; the first-trippers could be spotted by the way they stood goggle-eyed in front of the hundred square feet of the main viewplate, staring through its crystal sleekness at the unfathomable star-specked depths of space all around. In hyperspace the sky seemed to be frozen and unmoving. It was an overpowering sight the first time, and retained some of its wonder for Malin even after hundreds of space voyages.

There were a few honeymooning couples aboard ship too, for Dyrain was considered an ideal honeymoon spot for anyone who could afford the trip. It wasn't hard to recognize the honeymooners, of course. When they came out of their cabins at all, they stuck close together, looking faintly ill-at-ease and happy all at the same time.

About ten percent of the passengers were travelling alone. There were ten or fifteen rich young playboys of the type Malin was pretending to be, and there were about twenty single women, ranging in age from twenty-one to sixty-one or thereabouts. It was deemed excellent business policy to foment shipboard romances, and so Malin found himself thrown in contact with these women fairly frequently, whenever the ship's social director could arrange it.

He played his part to the hilt, dancing gaily, drinking, spending money without care. After all, if he ran short he could always wire an Intelligence contact-man for more.

Malin circulated very thoroughly through the passenger group, getting to know as many as he could. It was part of his job. After all, there was no telling which one or ones of them happened to be Denebian couriers, on their way to Dyrain with Terran military secrets to relay back to the enemy worlds.

It could be almost any of them—or it could be none. Perhaps the courier was Florence Cottrell, the black-haired divorcee who seemed so free with her favors. Perhaps it was fat old Ben Marshall, the widowed grain-merchant; perhaps the Donovans, who were both twenty-two, newly married, and not anxious to talk to anybody but each other.

Maybe Roy Buckley, Princeton '84, making an oat-sowing trip on his father's oil money, was carrying minimicrofilms of Terran documents with him. Or it could be the Brysons, loud and noisy and forty-five-ish, making their very first trip off Earth and making sure everybody aboard ship found out about it.

It could be any of them, or none. The Denebians could disguise their spy as well as Earth could disguise its counterspy, after all. Malin knew he would simply have to bide his time, keeping his eyes open, and watch and see. Jumping to premature conclusions might turn out to be fatal for him and disastrous for the Terran cause.

THE landing came off right on schedule—June 11, 2785, on the Galactic Absolute Calendar, which was pegged to Earth's own twenty-four hour day. Throughout all of the civilized galaxy, including the Denebian sector, the Galactic Absolute Calendar was in use. It made for less confusion to have every planet keeping time by the arbitrarily-designated Terran Second.

The *Song of Altair* emerged from hyperspace at the proper checkpoint and made the planetary landing with its auxiliary jets. It was mid-afternoon when the great ship came finally to

rest on the landing apron at the starport of Dyrain Bor, the largest city of Dyrain and the only one fully equipped to handle a ship of the size of the *Song of Altair*.

"Terran tourists this way, please," a crewman said, and Malin and his fellow passengers were led through the brightly lit corridors of the starport terminal to the immigration desks of the Dyrainna government. The journey took them outdoors for a short stretch. The day was warm and mild, with the temperature perhaps seventy-five or eighty and the humidity low. A gentle breeze drifted in over the starport, carrying the alien perfumes of strange forms of life. Overhead hung the sun, a golden-red ball whose bronze beams curiously altered colors and hues.

Dyrainna moved busily to and fro in the starport area. Malin studied them with interest. They were compactly-built humanoids, no more than five feet tall, with shimmering quick-moving eyes, set wide and apparently functioning independent of each other. Their noses were downswept beaks, their mouths wide and drooping. Most of them were a dark purple in color, though the range of color spread from light blue to a near-black.

It was possible to identify the castes, too. In the short walk Malin saw none of the administrators, but he knew they would be identified by the skull-crest of bright feathers. The priests, of which a few were visible, wore necklaces of brightly-polished silver coins as well as colorful head-crests. The merchant caste was marked by its clothing, which was loud of color and voluminous of cut, while the commoners, the members of the fourth caste, wore no crests nor coins and simple drab clothes.

But it was the untouchables who drew the whispered comments from the tourist party as it passed through the open area. Malin saw five or six of these unfortunates, clad in miserable rags, walking in a dismal shambling gait toward no particular destination. They seemed to be without hope, without life even, simply ema-

ciated walking corpses shunned by all.

They walked alone, not even keeping company with each other. Their bodies were shrunken from poverty and their eyes were turned toward the ground. Once Malin saw a merchant-caste member approach within a dozen feet of one of the pariahs and toss him a glittering coin. The pariah scooped it up without a word, and continued on his slow way.

"This way, please," their guide called to them.

They entered the customs shed, where their papers were checked through rapidly and their visas approved. A crisp-mannered English-speaking Dyrainna of the highest caste handled the procedure. Commoners lurked at the far end of the customs shed, ready to help out with carrying luggage in return for the Terran coins that served as legal currency throughout the galaxy.

When it was Malin's turn to go through the entry routine, the Dyrainna at the desk said, in a clear and un-accented English, "Are you travelling independently, Mr. O'Connor?"

Malin shook his head and smiled. "I'm supposed to report to Terran Tours, Inc. They're handling my itinerary."

The Dyrainna nodded briskly. "Very good, sir. The Terran Tours coach is just outside to your left. If you'll give your luggage voucher to me, I'll see to it that your bags reach you safely."

Malin surrendered the slip and passed through the shed and outdoors. A long green motor-coach of alien design waited there. Inscribed on it were the words TERRAN TOURS, INC. in English, and underneath it a series of bird-scratchings that probably were the same words in the native language of Dyrain.

MOST of the new arrivals from the *Song of Altair* had arranged their trip through the main office of Terran Tours, and so were all staying at the hotel operated by the travel company in Dyrain Bor. The motor-coach was greeted outside the hotel by a plump, pink-faced Earthman of about fifty, who met them as they stood in a huddled group wait-

ing to be led to the next stop.

"May I have your attention, please, ladies and gentlemen?" he asked, holding up his hands. "Thank you. My name is Robinson, and I'm the local representative of Terran Tours, Inc. Welcome to the pleasure-world of Dyrain, one and all! From here until the moment you blast off for your next port of call, I'll be helping you each and all to enjoy yourselves on Dyrain. First thing of all is to get you settled in your rooms. If you'll all come with me, please—"

It was a group of about fifty. Malin followed along, finding himself walking next to Florence Cottrell as they entered the hotel lobby.

"It's a lovely place, isn't it!" the divorcee chattered happily. "I mean the planet and the hotel too, of course! Weren't those pariahs *picturesque!* If I only had my camera out in time!"

With an enthusiasm that he did not feel, Malin agreed. "They're just skin and bones. It must be a terrible life, being an untouchable."

"Oh, they don't mind, I guess. It's their station in life, and they accept it."

Together they entered the hotel lobby. It was big and well furnished, and occupied mostly by Earthmen, though there were a few native servants scattered around—and, Malin noticed with some surprise, a pair of untouchables squatting on the plush carpet with begging-bowls at their sides. It was startling to see the pariahs in these luxurious surroundings. Evidently there was a taboo against restricting their wanderings.

At the desk, Malin picked up his room assignment and was told that his luggage would be delivered to his door. Florence Cottrell was given the room next to his; Malin wondered if Terran Tours, Incorporated had arranged that, as a possible method of starting a romance between unmarried members of the group.

He noticed other familiar faces from the ship being assigned to rooms. There was burly Ben Marshall, badgering a bellhop about something, and there were the honeymooning Donovans, smiling nervously at

each other and holding hands tightly. Elsewhere he saw Roy Buckley chatting with one of the girls from the ship, and the Brysons having an argument with each other.

Malin started to head for the gravshaft, with Florence Cottrell still tagging along. Suddenly she said, "Oh, excuse me! I *must* give something to that beggar!"

She darted across the lobby, moving well despite the six-inch spikes on her shoes, and unsnapped her purse. Malin saw a coin flash in her hand and drop with a *clink* into the begging bowl of one of the squatting crosslegged untouchables. The pariah made no gesture of thanks, did not even look up.

Returning, she said, "Silly of me, but I always do what the guidebooks say. It's supposed to be terribly good luck to give alms to the pariahs here!"

THE room they gave him was about what could be expected of a tourist hotel—that is, superficially decked out to seem alien, but actually not very much different from a hotel room back on Earth. There was a molecular bath and a washstand, and a polarized window; the lighting was by modern chemoluminescence. All very Earthlike indeed.

But alien features had been slapped on the surface. The room was decorated in a Dyrainna pattern that was hard on the eyes, a series of concentric ellipses, slightly lopsided, that dwindled away to nothingness—each of them a different color, and a color that by Terran standards clashed violently with its neighbor. A caged bird sat in one corner of the room, as was traditional in every Dyrainna household.

Malin studied the bird. It was reptilian-looking, with a full set of teeth and beady green eyes; its feathers were many-colored and somewhat greasy. As he approached, it parted its huge black beak and emitted a harsh keep-away kind of sound. He noticed that the cage was sealed by a radionic lock, to prevent curious tourists from releasing the obviously dangerous creature.

A pair of incense-burners

stood on the clothes-dresser. The tour people had left a thick folder of maps on the table, along with a guidebook in case he did not have one. Very thoughtful of them, Malin decided.

A timid knock sounded at the door. Malin opened it and found a very small Dyrainna standing outside, with his luggage.

"O'Connor-*haai?*"

"That's right," Malin said. He spoke English even though a knowledge of the Dyrainna language had been hypnotically instilled into him. A stockbroker from South Boston, Connecticut, was not expected to understand the language of a planet located several dozen light-years from Earth.

The alien boy carried his baggage inside and deposited it next to the bed. He stood waiting; Malin grinned and handed him a quarter-credit piece. The guidebook had said that the Dyrainna accepted Terran money even more readily than they did their own.

"Thank you very muchly," the boy said in halting English. He gestured with respect and then popped out of the room.

Malin unpacked quickly. His thoughts were of his mission. Somehow he had to uncover what was probably a skillfully-operated chain of spy couriers. He had no clues at all, except the information he had been given at the outset of his journey.

That was not much. A known Denebian spy had been captured a month before by Terran counterintelligence men, and in the course of their interrogation they had learned only that Dyrain served as a clearing-house for secret information. Somehow spies from the Terran area came to Dyrain and passed on their information to Denebians who carried it back into the enemy zone.

Indications were that some of the tourists who visited Dyrain from Earth were actually Denebian spies. But which ones, Malin wondered, and how will I detect them?

He finished unpacking. The roomphone rang, and he switched it on. The jovial features of the Terran Tours man, Robinson, appeared on the tiny

black-and-white phone screen.

"Everything all right, Mr. O'Connor?"

"Fine," Malin said.

"Glad to hear it. I'm calling all of the new arrivals to make sure they're having no difficulties."

"You people really believe in service, don't you?" Malin said.

Robinson chuckled. "We like to make our guests feel at home no matter what world they're on. I wanted to let you know that the first meal will be served in about an hour, in the hotel dining room. Do you have any particular food allergies?"

"Not a one."

"Fine, fine! There'll be Terran food available, by the way, in case the native stuff doesn't appeal to you. But I'm sure you'll enjoy it. Everyone does!"

AN hour later he was in the ornately furnished hotel dining room, having changed into the sort of costume Paul O'Connor was likely to wear but which privately filled Lloyd Malin with horror. It consisted of a fashionable blue cape over yellow tights and a spangled vest. He had stopped off at the hotel bar for a drink of kiezz first. As he had been told, it cost only half a credit a glass—a far cry from the five-credit tab he had paid at the Antarctica Starport.

In the dining room he found he had been seated at a table with Roy Buckley and a girl named Sarah, the Brysons, and Florence Cottrell. Robinson was circulating among the tourists, making sure all the new arrivals were enjoying themselves. Dyrainna waiters were bringing food to the tables. A bowl of mild wine sat near Malin's plate, and he poured some; it helped to neutralize the effect of the potent kiezz.

The first course was a sort of fish, pungent and apparently pretty gamy. Malin, who had sampled the foods of thirty planets and so was accustomed to almost anything, did not find the dish repugnant—but in the character of Paul O'Connor he felt called upon to offer some kind of comment, and he did.

"This stuff looks like it's been hanging in a closet for six months."

He wrinkled up his nose. Across the table from him Roy Buckley cut a slice and sampled it gingerly. Finally he nodded and pronounced his verdict: "It's good."

"I don't know," Malin said hesitantly.

"Go on," Florence Cottrell urged gigglingly. "Try some!"

He did, finally, and found it not unpleasant to the taste. But he left half of it on the plate anyway. The character he had assumed was one that was a little suspicious of alien things, and it wouldn't do for Paul O'Connor to take to Dyrainna cookery too quickly.

The next course was a vegetable, and after that meat; Robinson circulated, explaining what each thing was to anyone who was curious. Malin ate quietly, saying little, listening with care, hoping someone might make a slip that would give him his first clue.

Halfway through the meat course an untouchable appeared at the doorway of the dining room—a wiry little Dyrainna, wearing only a loincloth. He carried a wooden begging-bowl, and began to circulate, pleading with his eyes for scraps of leftover food.

"I think that's disgusting," Mrs. Bryson said. "Letting filthy beggars wander around a hotel dining room!"

"It's the custom here," Florence Cottrell said. "The pariahs are holy men. Nobody dares stop them no matter where they want to go or what they do."

Mrs. Bryson shook her head stubbornly. "I *still* think it's a filthy habit!"

The pariah, as if he had heard her petulant exclamation, immediately changed course and headed for their table, standing patiently at Mrs. Bryson's elbow without uttering a word. She sawed away doggedly at her meat, trying to ignore the untouchable.

Unsmellable too, Malin thought. Evidently the beggars didn't believe in baths.

After a long moment the pariah abandoned his idea of cadging a scrap from Mrs. Bryson, and moved around the table to stand near Malin and Florence Cottrell. Grinning, Malin severed a gristly section of his meat and dumped it into

the greasy bowl. The beggar nodded and left the vicinity to devour his prize.

Mrs. Bryson muttered something darkly. Her husband tried to soothe her. Malin studied them both with diligent care. She was behaving too much like a typical tourist for it to be entirely convincing, he thought. Quite possibly all this loud complaining about the pariah was intended as a form of camouflage. Perhaps—

His attention was abruptly diverted from the Brysons by the arrival of a waiter bearing a tureen of soup. As the waiter staggered toward the table under the weight of the heavy tray, the pariah happened to cross his path, startling him and causing him to lose his balance.

Half a tureen of hot soup cascaded out over the diners at the table. Malin received a stinging splash against the back of his right hand; next to him, Florence Cottrell got the bulk of the soup on her neck and shoulders, while Mr. Bryson took a searing on his left arm.

Neither the woman nor Bryson had ever learned the Jensen pain-controlling techniques, and so they yelled in pain; Malin, who had learned them, remained silent. At once Robinson came rushing toward the table, shouting apologies as he came. The waiter was down on his knees, mumbling in Dyrainna; the untouchable scurried quickly away from the scene.

Malin assured the apologetic Robinson that he had not been badly hurt, and then turned to look at Florence Cottrell, whose dress had been ruined and who seemed to have had a good scalding.

He looked at her with great interest. For at the moment when the soup landed she had cried out a single word: *"Faroo!"*

Malin found that very interesting. For *faroo* happened to be a particularly obscene curse-word—in the language of the Denebians.

IN the momentary confusion following the accident, Malin did his best to make it seem as if he hadn't heard the incriminating obscenity that had involuntarily slipped from the woman's lips. He accepted a

napkin and the apologies of the management and wiped his sleeve. The hotel officials were so profusely upset about the incident that it was almost embarrassing to listen to them.

Malin was grateful to the clumsy waiter, though. The spilling of a bowl of soup had given him the first clue in his search.

The dining-room returned to normal after a while, and a new waiter began to serve them. Robinson assured them that the other Dyrainna was so disturbed by the incident that he had suffered a collapse and might possibly commit suicide in atonement.

"Oh, he shouldn't do that!" Mrs. Bryson exclaimed. "It really wasn't his fault. That foul little beggar scooted right in front of him just as he came along with the soup!"

Robinson smiled reproachfully. "One of the fundamentals of Dyrainna culture, Mrs. Bryson, is the freedom of the pariah to go wherever he likes. You must understand this fact to understand the way of life here."

Her husband turned on her and said savagely, "You see, Bessie? If you bothered to read the guidebook you would have known—"

"George! Don't start anything here!"

Robinson attempted to check the quarrel before it began. Meanwhile, Malin turned his attention to Florence Cottrell and said, "Are you all right?"

She looked pale. *No wonder,* Malin thought. *She's wondering if she gave herself away with that Denebian cussword.*

She said indistinctly, "I'm—a little shaken up, I guess. The sudden shock—"

"Would you want me to show you to your room?" Malin suggested.

Smiling faintly, she said, "If it wouldn't be too much trouble—that is—"

"No trouble at all," Malin said gallantly. "Anything to help a lady in distress."

He rose from the table and helped her to her feet. The ubiquitous Robinson came by and Malin said to him, "Mrs. Cottrell feels a little shaky right now. I'm going to take her to her room."

"Perhaps you'd do better to

finish your meal," Robinson suggested. "One of the hotel staff could show her upstairs, and—"

"No, I'd rather," Malin said, winking broadly at the other. Robinson caught the implication; he grinned and said, "Very well. I hope you'll be feeling better soon, Mrs. Cottrell. And please accept our humblest apologies for this. It's a terrible way to begin a visit to a new planet, I know."

MALIN steered her through the big dining-room and out onto the balcony at left that led to the gravshaft. She was walking unsteadily; obviously the sudden shower of hot soup *had* been a shock to her nervous system—enough of a shock to shatter her meticulous facade of false identity for at least a moment.

A moment that she was probably regretting right now, Malin thought.

But he believed that she would recover from that soon enough. After all, he was only a South Boston stockbroker, and unless she had been warned to expect a counterspy in the group she would not suspect him of having understood the word she had uttered.

At the door of her room she turned and smiled at him, saying, "I'd better get out of this dress, hadn't I? Will you excuse me a moment?"

"Of course."

The dress, a plastiloom affair of translucent lace and yellow crepe, was just about ruined; a great dark area had appeared in back. Malin watched her disappear into her room, then turned and entered his own, which lay adjoining hers.

Quickly he unpacked the small kit he had carried tucked inside his shaving bag, and began to set up the equipment he wanted. A tiny ultrasonic spray, no larger than the sting of a bee, which fastened on a thread round his middle finger—a spray designed to inject veronone, the newest truth serum, at the most minute pressure.

He attached the spray to his finger, checked to make sure it was in functioning order, and straightened his cape. His hand was slightly blistered where the

soup had struck it, but he felt no pain.

After a few moments he returned to the hall and knocked gently at Florence Cottrell's door.

"May I come in?"

"Of course," she said in a seductive voice.

She had changed her clothes. The ruined plastiloom dress lay in a crumpled heap on the chair, and she had donned a peignoir of sheer blue webfoam that revealed a smooth, remarkably feminine body beneath. The divorcee had been able to read "Paul O'Connor's" mind with ease, guessing why he had wanted to take her upstairs.

He wondered whether she had been able to deduce Lloyd Malin's motives as well. He hoped not.

"You're lovely," he said softly. It was not a lie. She was a long-limbed, seductive wench, about thirty or so, with creamy skin and lustrous dark hair. The Denebians pick their spies well, he thought.

She smiled and said in a throaty voice, "My nerves need calming. Come here, Mr. O'Connor."

He drew close to her and she seemed to glide into his arms. Holding her tight, feeling the warmth of her against him, the fullness of her breasts, the sharp intake of her breath as he clasped her, he caressed her shoulders, then the small of her back, searching for the area of sensitivity where the truth serum would take most immediate effect—

He found it. As she clung to him muttering wordless sounds in what seemed like very real passion, Malin tightened his grasp on her and activated the ultrasonic spray. A nerve-jolting shot of veronone painlessly penetrated her skin.

It took only a moment to act. One second she was grinding herself against him hungrily; the next she had relaxed, gone almost limp, and the passion had vanished from her. He looked at her eyes. They were glassy. She was ready to give him any information he wanted from her, now.

SHE was like a bundle of old rags as he put her down on the bed, propping her head up against the pillow. She stared

at him, but her eyes did not see him. She was in a state of quick-term hypnotic trance.

Malin activated the microrecorder within his slightly overlarge wristwatch and said, "Can you hear me, Mrs. Cottrell?"

"Yes." She sounded a thousand light-years away.

"Good. Just for a start, Mrs. Cottrell, suppose you tell me your real name?"

"Floren Cutril."

It was a Denebian name. Malin said, "Where were you born?"

"New Batavia, on Deneb IV."

"Ah. How old are you?"

"Twenty-nine."

Malin nodded. "How long were you on Earth posing as Mrs. Florence Cottrell?"

"Six months."

"And where did you stay during that time?"

"Several places. I was in Washington and London and Montreal."

"What did you do in those places?"

"I served as a spy for the D e n e b i a n Confederation of Worlds," she said calmly.

Malin grinned happily. "You served as a spy? And how did you transmit your information back to Deneb?"

"I didn't. I minimicrofilmed my material and brought it with me to Dyrain."

"What have you done with it here?"

"Passed some of it on to the contact who was appointed to take the material."

"Who was this?"

"The untouchable who was begging in the lobby. He's my contact man."

Malin's eyes widened in surprise. "The *untouchable?* Is he a native Dyrainna?"

"I don't know."

He scowled. "How did you give him the data?"

"Inside a hollow coin. I dropped it in his begging bowl. I have five more coins which I will give him in the next five days."

That was easily checked. "Where are those coins?"

"In my purse. Get me my purse and I'll find them for you."

He considered that a moment. Her purse might contain a weapon; he doubted that any-

one in the veronone trance could attempt an attack, but he didn't want to risk it. He found her purse, scooped out all her change, and handed it to her. She fumbled through the coins, picked out five normal-looking half-credit pieces, and gave them back to him.

He examined it. "How do you open it?"

"Pressure. I'll show you."

She took a coin from him and deftly flicked it open. It was hollow; inside lay a tightly coiled roll of minimicrofilm. Picking up another of the coins, he opened it himself and found another roll within. He opened the other three; they, too, contained film.

He said, "You are supposed to give the coins to the beggar. But what does *he* do with them? Surely he isn't a Denebian. Who does he pass them to?"

"I....don't know."

Annoyed, he repeated the question. Again she shrugged blankly and denied knowledge. He realized she was telling the truth; she *had* to, under veronone. The Denebians set up relay systems for stolen secrets for just this reason—even if one link in the chain were detected, that left several others still to be found.

"All right," he said. He sealed the dummy coins again, pocketed them, and put five half-credit coins of his own into her purse. "I'm taking the message-coins and giving you good ones. When you wake, you'll remember nothing that has taken place since I entered this room. You will think that the coins you now have still contain the messages, and you will pass them along as previously planned. Is this understood?"

"Yes."

He replaced her purse on the dresser, bent over her, and injected a quick burst of the antidote. It took several minutes for her mind to clear; she stirred uneasily, rubbed her eyes, looked up at him, puzzled.

"I must have fainted," she said.

He nodded. "You blanked out completely. It must have been the shock of what happened before. Are you all right now?"

"I—think so." She smiled at

him. "Let's finish what we started before!"

She pulled him hungrily toward herself.

THE next morning, Malin paid close attention to Florence Cottrell as they breakfasted in the hotel dining-room. She looked at him slyly, as a girl might look at a man with whom she had begun an affair only the night before, but there was nothing in her glance that implied she was aware he knew her secret.

The veronone had worked, then. He had extracted the information he wanted without her knowledge.

They breakfasted on Dyrainna sausages and local coffee, which was a bluish aromatic compound made from the leaves of a common Dyrainna tree. Robinson appeared at the end of the meal to announce to the vacationers that a motor-coach tour through the city of Dyrain Bor was on the slate for the morning—strictly voluntary, of course.

Florence Cottrell said, "How lovely! I can't wait to see the city!"

"I won't be able to make it," Malin said sadly.

"Oh, no? Why?"

He grinned. "I have to visit someone on business this morning. The tour will just have to wait."

"Can't you put it off?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Oh, you stockbrokers! Business business business all the time!"

"Can't help myself. But you can have a good time without me."

She reddened slightly, then shrugged. Malin thought that she was giving a remarkably good imitation of the love-hungry young divorcee on the loose—but luckily for him she had made one slip, and that had been enough. He could forget about her, now. He had to concentrate on uncovering the rest of the chain.

He accompanied her down to the lobby after breakfast; the motor-coach was waiting outside, loading up with tourists. A Dyrainna sat behind the wheel, but an Earthman from Terran Tours was guiding people aboard. It was a hot morning; the big bronze-red sun was

already high overhead. In the distance Malin could see the alien-looking buildings of the city, and beyond them the green mountains that looked down on Dyrain Bor.

And there was the beggar, sitting quietly in the sun on the front porch, begging bowl by his side. Florence Cottrell said, "There's that beggar again. I think I'll give him something."

Malin said, "Really, Flo. Isn't he the same one who tripped the waiter last night?"

"No, that was a different one," she said.

"Oh? Can you tell them apart? They look all alike to me."

She paled slightly, as if realizing she had made another slip. Then she said, "The other one had a mustache. This one has a beard. Anyway, the guidebook says it's good luck to be generous to them—and at my age I need all the luck I can get!"

She crossed the porch and opened her purse. Malin watched as she examined her change, finally selecting a half-credit piece and dropping it in the beggar's bowl. The pariah made no response.

"That can get expensive," Malin said.

She giggled. "After what this trip is costing me, a few credits for charity don't even show."

The tour-leader cupped his hand and said, "Last call for the Dyrain Bor bus-trip. All aboard!"

"Guess I better go," the girl said. She smiled at him, blew him a kiss, and dashed into the bus.

Malin turned to look around for the untouchable. A moment before the man had been squatting in the corner of the porch; now he had risen and was ambling off down the street. Malin decided he had better follow.

Suddenly the bulky form of the genial Robinson interposed itself.

"Not going on the tour, Mr. O'Connor?"

"I'm afraid not," Malin said. He peered round Robinson, trying to keep an eye on the retreating pariah.

Robinson said, "You really should. You'll miss quite a treat if you don't see the city."

"I'll see it some other time.

I have a business appointment today, and—"

"Oh? What kind of business?"

Malin gritted his teeth. Patiently he said, "At the local stock market. It's a highly technical matter; I don't have time to explain."

"I see. Well, good luck. I hope the unfortunate incident of last night hasn't soured you on Terran Tours, Mr. O'Connor."

"Of course not." Robinson seemed to have so much to say, Malin thought! He disengaged himself from the over-friendly tour director and headed toward the untouchable.

There was no sign of him. While he had been detained by the talkative Robinson, the pariah had disappeared.

HE started to make his way down the crowded street as the bus pulled away. He had no idea where the untouchable might have gone—but he wanted to take a look around anyway, and perhaps he would be able to stumble into him. Luck seemed to be running this way on the trip so far.

Alien smells assailed him on all sides as he walked. The day was growing hot already—not unpleasantly so, for Dyrain's climate was always moderate, but there was a definite warmth in the air. Hawkers' cries reached him from right and from left— *"Buy this lovely h u n t i n g bird, Earthman!" "How about a flower for your lady?" "Roasted daarth-nuts for sale!"*

He paused in front of the daarth-nut booth and offered the hawk-eyed little Dyrainna vendor a quarter-credit piece. He was handed a little leather pouch containing a dozen or so of the brittle, salty black nuts.

He said to the proprietor, "I'm searching for a pariah with a beard and no mustache. I think he came this way. Have you seen him?"

Coldly the alien said, "We do not see those people even when they brush by our robes."

"I see." There would be no help here. He kept on going, through the noisy bazaar.

They were selling fresh-killed meat at the next corner; blue-bodied flies the size of one-credit pieces fluttered over the

exposed, butchered carcasses. Withered old women haggled with the butchers, who clawed at the sky in exasperation.

Very picturesque, Malin thought. The entire city looked picturesque. As if it had been carefully arranged for the benefit of tourists in search of quaint sights.

Two streets down, he spied an untouchable—standing alone, begging-bowl at his side, staring off into nothingness. He was not the one who served as Florence Cottrell's courier. This one had a flowing mustache of almost greenish hue, and no beard.

He was a hideous sight, in his rags and sores. As Malin looked at him, wondering if it made sense to ask him if he knew a fellow pariah with a beard, two Earth tourists appeared, a man and woman, the man carrying an expensive-looking tridim camera.

"Would you mind stepping to one side," the man said to Malin. "I'd like to get a shot of the pariah."

"Of course."

The camera clicked; the pariah stood stock-still as if posing. The woman nudged her husband, who reluctantly pulled a small coin from his pocket and dropped it in the untouchable's begging-bowl.

Malin said, "That'll make a lovely shot."

"We have so many gorgeous photos!" the woman oozed.

"How long have you been here?"

"Three weeks. You?"

"Just got here yesterday." A thought occurred to Malin and he said, "Maybe you can help me. I'm supposed to meet a friend in the untouchable's quarter, but I can't seem to find it."

"Most of them live about eight streets from here," the tourist said. "Just go down this narrow road here and follow along straight. You can't miss it. You'll smell it three blocks away."

THE tourist was right. The foul odor of rotting meat and unwashed bodies reached Malin long before the shanty-town came into view. It wasn't hard to tell that he was drawing near the dismal quarter of

Dyrain Bor where the pariahs congregated.

The houses had probably been dilapidated ten centuries ago. Most of them were two-story half-timbered affairs that leaned crazily out over the narrow, badly-paved streets. Pariahs stood everywhere, with the particular hopeless expression on their faces that was so horrifying, staring off into the void.

Naked children, pot-bellied from malnutrition, squalled and rolled in the streets. Malin caught an occasional glimpse of a pariah woman, veiled discreetly lest her glance pollute some upper-cast Dyrainna male, hovering in one of the alcoves.

A few tourists wandered through the district, snapping shots to display back home. This was poverty; this was filth. Earth had not had anything like this for centuries, and there was a peculiar fascination, Malin admitted to himself, in seeing this sargasso of human debris.

He corrected himself: *not* human. Humanoid. And there was all the difference in the galaxy in that one syllable, he thought.

He wondered what incentive the Denebians had used to get these people to spy for them. Probably the promise of a little food, no more. It didn't take much to bribe beings that were totally without hope.

He shook his head. His job was to smash the spy ring, for the sake of Earth and its kindred worlds. He was not here to pity the untouchables, but simply to put an end to the flow of secrets through them to the enemies of Earth.

Once Deneb had been allied with Earth, the mother world. After all, Earth had settled the Denebian system with colonists, hundreds of years ago. But a great gap of light-years separates Earth and Deneb, and in time friction sprang up between the two mighty powers of the galaxy—friction that had resulted in a century-old cold war spreading out over thousands of light-years. Dyrain was neutral, admitting Denebians and Earthmen alike to its ports—but obviously the Denebians were gaining sway here, if they had already won over the untouchables.

Perhaps, he thought, the Denebians were planning to touch off a revolution of the untouchables against the upper castes. That would be typical of them, all right.

He looked around. He was getting nowhere on this quest; he had just about decided to return to the hotel and wait for the bearded pariah to make his appearance there again, when he heard a grunt behind him, and whirled not quite in time to avoid a stinging blow on the side of his head.

HE turned and saw a slight figure behind him wielding a heavy club and lifting it for a second blow. He recognized the attacker: he was the bearded untouchable who had been Florence Cottrell's spy-courier.

Malin had better than a foot's height advantage over the alien. As the pariah started to bring the club down, Malin stepped to one side, caught the alien's arm, and bent it. The club dropped; the pariah emitted a little gasp of pain. Malin held the arm tight—the Dyrainna's bare, filthy skin felt coarse and almost scaly—and tugged the alien along with him.

He knew he had to get the creature out of the pariah quarter fast. Right now the half-starved creatures were simply watching the encounter, but perhaps in a few moments they would decide to protect their fellow against the Earthman.

The untouchable wriggled and tried to get free, but Malin held him firmly by one hand and groped in his pocket for the tiny ultrasonic hypodermic filled with veronone. Intelligence had assured him that the drug was capable of affecting the metabolism of any sentient being.

He jabbed the spray against the alien's arm and activated it. The response was immediate; the Dyrainna subsided and stood obediently in his tracks.

Malin said, in the Dyrainna language, "Can you hear what I'm saying?"

The pariah nodded.

"Follow along at my side. Answer whatever questions I ask you."

Again the affirmative. They started to walk.

Malin said, "You received a

coin from a lady in the hotel yesterday. What did the coin have inside it?"

"A message."

"What kind of message?"

"I do not know. I cannot read."

Malin was willing to accept that. "What did you do with the message?"

"I turned it over to him who was to receive it."

"And who was that?"

"I do not know his name."

Scowling, Malin asked, "Where can I find him?"

"At the hotel."

"Okay. We're on our way there."

After a few moments he said, "How long have you been doing this sort of thing?"

"Many months. I am told to sit in the hotel and wait for those who give me half-credit pieces. All half-credit pieces that I receive, I turn over to him who employs me, and he gives me food and money."

Malin understood. It was a foolproof system, *almost*—hire an ignorant beggar to serve as go-between, taking the concealed messages from Denebian spies newly arrived from the Terran sector and relaying them to the central Denebian intelligence representative, who then forwarded them to the home office.

"Why do you spy on Earth?" Malin asked.

"Because we hate the Earthmen."

"Why?"

"They made us untouchables," the pariah said simply.

"I don't understand. Explain."

"Before the Earthmen came, there was no such thing as an untouchable on Dyrain. My father five generations ago was a merchant. But when the Earthmen came it was decided that the Earthmen would like to visit our planet better if we had an untouchable caste, and so a lottery was held and those who were selected had to forfeit all their property and become outcasts. This is why we hate the Earthmen and would see the Denebians triumph."

It had been a long speech, and the drugged alien's voice nearly gave out before the end of it. Suddenly Malin felt a chill run through him.

It can't be true, he thought.

Yet it was possible. The entire pariah caste might have been created at the wish of the Terran tourist agencies, who knew that the sight of poverty and suffering would inevitably attract thousands of tourists.

A tourist come-on? A publicity trick?

He tried to picture thousands of Dyrainna uprooted from their way of life solely to please the wealthy Terrans who scattered their cash so freely on Dyrain. Small wonder these pariahs were spying for the Denebians, then.

His throat felt dry. But the discovery did not alter his sense of duty. He was not here to pass judgment on the tourist trade but simply to safeguard the security of Earth by uprooting the spy-chain.

They reached the hotel. Malin said to the alien, "Now you will take me to the man to whom you give the coins you receive."

THEY mounted the porch steps, Malin following the alien a few paces behind. It would cause comment if he were seen by other Earthmen actually walking with one of the untouchables.

As they passed through the doorway, the pariah first and then the Earthman, Malin said, quietly, "All right. You'll find the man and you'll point him out to me. Do you understand that?"

"Yes."

They had taken no more than six steps when Robinson, the Terran Tours man appeared and grinned amiably at the approaching Malin.

"Back so soon, Mr. O'Connor? I hope your business meeting was a success."

Before Malin had any chance to reply, the untouchable said, in a calm, flat voice, "He is the ones I give the coins to."

It was spoken in Dyrainna, and perhaps Robinson thought Malin would not understand. In any event, the Terran Tours man went for his blaster a moment too slowly. By the time Robinson had the weapon in his hand and cocked, it was too late. Malin had drawn his own weapon and had put a needle-ray beam through the other's thick forearm, charring a neat

hole half an inch in diameter right through. Robinson's gun dropped, and a moment later the fat tour-manager was on his knees, clutching his wounded arm with his good one.

Malin bent and scooped up the gun. The pariah stood as if frozen.

People came running from all corners of the hotel lobby now, having heard the flash. Keeping his gun trained on Robinson, Malin said slowly and clearly, "Everything's all right. I'm an agent of Terra Intelligence. This man Robinson's a dangerous Denebian spy."

"He's lying," Robinson said thickly, in a voice heavy with pain.

Calmly Malin said, "I can prove everything I say."

To a nearby bellhop he said, "Suppose you call the office of the Terran Consul and arrange for a pickup. And there's another Denebian spy aboard that tour-coach that left this morning. We'll have to pick her up when the coach gets back."

An hour later, alone in his room, Malin had finished his report to Earth and had beamed it out over tight-wave communication to the nearest pickup outpost of the Terra Intelligence communication system.

It was a neat, simple arrangement. The Denebians had hired fifty or a hundred pariahs to serve as couriers; the arriving Denebian spies, all of them guests at the hotel run by "Robinson," would slip the coin-encased documents to the pariahs, who later would return them to the Denebian master-spy posing as the hotel manager.

That way the chain of communication was in doubt; who would suspect a filthy untouchable of being the middleman in such a deal? If the couriers had given their material direct to Robinson, the arrangement might have been detected long before.

Malin rose and walked to the window. It was all over now. The Terran police had taken Robinson and Florence Cottrell away for interrogation, and the hot protests of the Denebian authorities on Dyrain had been silenced when Malin had produced the minimicrofilms he

had taken from the Cottrell woman.

It was time for him to return to Earth, his pose as a tourist ended, and accept reassignment to whatever task would best serve the interests of Earth.

He was going to remember the Dyrain mission, though. He'd remember the girl who called herself Florence Cottrell, and he'd remember how a spy-chain was uncovered by a bowl of soup.

But most of all he'd remember the sad-eyed untouchable, the most pathetic spy ever employed by Deneb. He was going to have to forget the pariah's story if he meant to stay loyal to Earth.

The bronze-red rays of the midday sun came filtering through the window. The alien bird in its cage squawked fiercely at him. The Earthman shook his head, thinking of thousands of people forced into poverty to satisfy the curiosity of Terran tourists.

The Denebians say we're selfish and arrogant, he thought. *That we'll eventually lose control of the galaxy because of our attitude toward other races. And maybe the Denebians aren't wrong.*

Maybe.

He tried to forget the face of the half-starved pariah. But he knew he never would succeed.

THE END

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NOTHING'S IMPOSSIBLE

by CHARLES L. FONTENAY

illustrated by BOWMAN

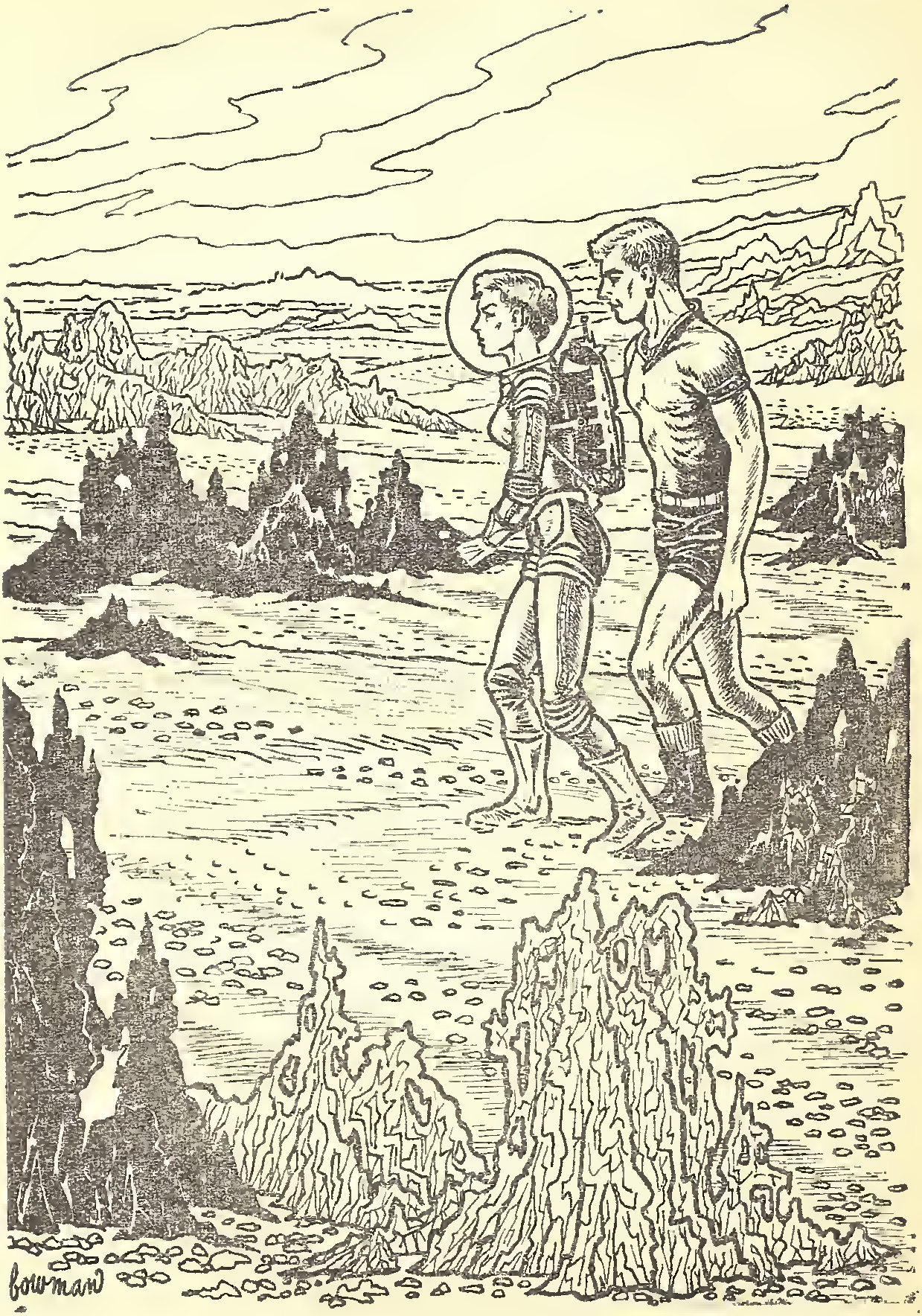
The air on Mars was unbreathable, of course. But was it? The powers of the human mind and the human will are unlimited. Man can do anything he *REALLY* wants

MARTHA'S uncle was a member of the Order of the Diegan Brothers. Because the Path of Life he had chosen was the study of Martian desert biology, this House of Brotherhood was at the southeastern edge of the Cynia dome and he had his own private airlock opening out onto the Ausonia Australis Desert.

Martha spent a great deal of her time there during her visit to Mars. Uncle Theodore and his House of Brotherhood affected her soul alike. After the technological hustle of the dome-city or the buffeting of the thin, sand-sharp desert wind, Uncle Theodore's quiet smile and the green shadows of his garden immersed her in dreamy peace.

"Peace is within the individual," said Theodore when she mentioned this. "Man does not conquer the material world by rejecting it or retreating from it. He must first accept it for what it is, neither good nor evil in itself; then the strength of his own soul will shape the world around him into an extension of himself."

Martha shifted a bit restlessly on the simple, hard-backed bench. She was blonde and sunny, like the quicksilvered light cast by a moving mirror in the afternoon gloom of Theodore's stark study room. Theodore sat tranquilly


bowman

behind his desk, still toying with a booktape he had been on the verge of projecting when Martha had come in from downtown Cynia a little earlier.

"Somehow, that's a frightening prospect to me," she said. "I don't believe I'd want the world around me an extension of what I am."

"That's because you lack confidence in yourself," said Theodore. "The extension of self to encompass and shape the surrounding world has been a reasonably straight evolutionary path since life appeared on Earth."

He arose and walked to the window that looked out toward the desert, seeming to flow comfortably in the loose, grey robes he wore.

"Of c o u r s e," he added thoughtfully, "here it faltered and failed short of its goal. Where on Earth the plants and animals were able to change the atmosphere and free themselves, on Mars the canal sage plant must hold its scarce oxygen close to its breast to stave off death."

Suddenly the world returned to Theodore's face. He leaned forward, placing his hands on the windowsill. His eyes narrowed and he peered out across the garden and through the transparent dome of Cynia.

"It appears I'm about to have more company," he said. "If that's who I think it is, he'll probably come here instead of to the city airlock."

Martha arose and went to his side. In her white blouse, short red skirt and knee-length socks, she contrasted colorfully with the sober grey Brother.

FAR out on the red desert, she saw a lone figure moving .....a man. The tight little horizons of Mars made him seem farther away, and larger, than she knew he was. The Martian air was thin and clear, but the light of the afternoon sun, a hundred and forty million miles away, was weak; and Martha could distinguish no details of the distant form that flickered against the purple southeastern twilight.

"How can you tell who it is at that distance?" Martha asked.

"I can't, certainly," answered Theodore, caressing his square, smooth-shaven jaw. "It could be one of the Cynia geol-

ogists, returning from an excursion. But, on foot.....if I'm right, Martha, you'll see something your friends on Earth won't believe—nor many on Mars who haven't witnessed it. Let's go out and wait in the garden."

Together they left the house. The garden was cloistered by pearly ceramic walls and was verdant with lush grass and silvery soft maples. Primroses and daylilies overhung its paths with colour, for the hot-blooded plants that required Earth's rich sunshine would not bloom here.

Martha followed Theodore, a step or two behind, down the narrow path toward the little airlock. She had been on Mars for an Earth-year now, and in two more 42-day Martian months she would go back to Mars City and catch the spaceship on its return journey to Earth.

This Martian voyage was a long one and an expensive one, but Uncle Theodore had raised her as a little girl and she had wanted to see him once again before his Path of Life ended. Of course, Uncle Theodore was still a vigourous fifty-five, but a trip to Mars was a major undertaking, which she doubted would be repeated for her.

She had been fortunate. To help defray expenses, she had managed to get an assignment from *Humanitie of Rio* to push its line of terrestrial women's fashions on Mars. Without that windfall, she could not have made the trip.

They reached the airlock and stood to one side of it, looking out through the plastic wall of the city dome. The figure was nearer now, and coming toward the city.

"Who is it?" asked Martha curiously.

"If I'm right.....I'm almost sure I'm right, now..... it's the Desert Stalker."

"The Desert Stalker? That's a legend, isn't it?" Martha experienced a weird premonition. She did recall that much, and that the legend was a strange one, but she could not remember what it was.

"You'll see." Theodore's face was turned from her, but she could hear his smile.

Strongly interested now, she watched the approaching figure closely. It *was* someone afoot, striding easily across the

hard-packed sand. That in itself was something unusual. Ordinarily anyone who went out any distance into the Martian desert rode in a big-wheeled, big-tired groundcar, despite the scarcity of fuel. There was no reason for anyone to *walk* in the desert, except perhaps a student like Theodore.

Before he was close enough for her to distinguish any details, she could tell by the walk that the figure was a man and not a woman. The low-level rays of the sinking sun flashed redly from flesh and cloth as from metal, making visibility both more striking and more vaguely defined than it would have been earlier in the day.

Even as the man drew near enough for her to see him more clearly, the sudden Martian twilight illumined the desert with that startling lucidity that made objects stand out in fine, sharp detail as though painted in tempera.

It was then that Martha saw the man wore no marsuit!

A short-sleeved shirt and walking shorts exposed his flesh to the plummeting temperatures outside the dome, which now must be well below the freezing point of water. No loose coveralls of synthetics protected him from the increasing cold of the Martian night.

His head was naked to the thin, unbreathable Martian air, and the desert wind riffled his hair. No clear helmet clasped a warm bubble of oxygen to his nostrils.

Yet, impossibly, he lived and walked.

THE man came into the airlock. He was tall and powerful. His face was lined and browned by the desert wind, and his hair was black. He carried a bulky pack easily in one hand.

Theodore closed the outer entrance to the airlock and let the air hiss into it. Instantly the Stalker's breath congealed into a jet of white steam that wreathed his head and concealed his face for a moment. Then he stepped through the airlock's inner door and confronted them.

"W e l c o m e, Fors," said Theodore, shaking hands with the newcomer. "Martha, this

is Fors Venturi, the Desert Stalker."

Fors turned to Martha and took her hand. She found her heart at once transfixed by the most electric blue eyes she had ever seen.

"Theodore's niece?" said Fors, his great hand enfolding hers. "I had hoped we'd meet before you left Mars, Miss Bruun. Theodore has spoken of you often.

Together the three of them moved through the garden and into the house, moving easily in the light Martian gravity.

"A little wine for the stomach's sake," said Theodore, taking a treasured bottle from his cupboard. "How long will you stay in Cynia this time, Fors?"

"Several days," answered Fors. "There are some materials I need, and your city-dwellers are close traders."

Theodore poured the wine carefully into three long-stemmed glasses.

"I wish you could see Fors' place out in the desert," Theodore said to Martha, handing her a glass. "It's fabulous. Simple, but fabulous. And no dome. Are you going to let me study your metabolism this time, Fors?"

"I'm afraid not," replied Fors, with a broad smile. "I'm not one of your desert specimens, Theodore. Besides, I don't want to cloud your pure faith with prosaic scientific explanations."

"Science is the handwriting of God on the searching minds of men," said Theodore quietly. "Scientific explanations do not disturb my faith. They strengthen it."

Fors sipped his wine, and turned his deep eyes on Martha.

"How long have you been in Cynia, Miss Bruun?" he asked.

"Only a little more than a week this time," she answered, a little breathlessly. "I've been here often since I arrived on Mars, though. I've had to travel around from city to city a great deal, and every time my travels brought me near Cynia I've taken a little vacation and come over to spend a few days with Uncle Theodore."

"Cynia is an interesting city," said Fors. "Much more so than Mars City, in many respects. While I'm here I'll

show you some of Cynia's aspects that would be unlikely to attract a dry old hermit like Theodore."

FORS kept his promise. During the next week, he and Martha went out together into the city often. That week stretched into two, and then three, and still Fors remained in Cynia, and still he and Martha saw Cynia together.

He showed her the Crystal Palace, a collection of desert rocks carved by the thin Martian wind into fantastic shapes. She had seen this with Theodore, but Theodore had talked with her of chemical composition and effects, and the tiny plant life that could be found clinging to the different kinds of stones in their natural habitat. Fors spoke of the poetry and beauty of the rocks; in his voice she heard the desert wind keening across the dunes, and in his eyes she saw the sun sparkling from the faceted crags.

They dined and danced at the Cote d'Azur, whose tiered dining terraces sprawled along a blue clay slope in the northern section of Cynia, and Martha realized as she had not before that the urban life of Mars was not altogether a hard struggle against cold, drought and a hostile atmosphere.

They visited the markets and the compact vegetable farms. At the theatres, they saw plays and films which Martha had seen on Earth five years before, but here and now the acting seemed more competent, the dialogue sharper, the colours of the films brighter. She found this mysterious desert wanderer fascinatingly human, and enjoyed herself thoroughly.

"What do you do and why do you live in the desert?" asked Martha one afternoon as they sipped wine at one of the sidewalk cafes in the city's central park.

"You might say that Theodore and I are colleagues," answered Fors. "We both study desert biology. But Theodore examines and catalogues things as they are. I seek to change them into what they can be."

He smiled a slow smile.

"You might say," he added, "that my ambition is to be an agent of evolution."

They could have been sit-

ting on a sidewalk in a city of Earth, except for the easy Martian gravity and the silver-grey dome that arched far above them. People in light clothing strolled by, others sat at tables and chatted. The trees of Earth grew green in the park, and above their tops reared the buildings of downtown Cynia.

"I've heard speculation," said Martha, "about creating a liveable atmosphere on Mars by importing and propagating enough terrestrial plants. Is that what you're trying to do?"

"That's how a breathable atmosphere was established on Earth," said Fors, "but it won't work here. You see, green plants use sunlight to free oxygen from carbon dioxide on Earth, then use part of this oxygen for breathing at night, just as animals do.

"But Earth's atmosphere is one-fifth oxygen, and there isn't enough carbon dioxide in the Martian atmosphere to make that much oxygen—there's less than one per cent. Besides, water is scarce on Mars, and it takes a lot of water to support lush plant life. That's why the major plants here are small, stick to the lowlands and hoard the oxygen they make either inside their tissues or under a canopy of tight-packed leaves."

"What sort of course *can* you follow in trying to change things, then?" she asked curiously.

"Alter living things so they can live without oxygen," he answered.

He smiled as he said it, and she could not be sure he was serious. Before she could pursue the matter farther, he changed the subject in a manner that took her breath away.

He laid his hand on hers, and a vibrant current seemed to surge between them.

"You know, of course, that I love you," he said quietly.

Gazing into his deep blue eyes, her lips parted, seemingly suspended in the still vortex of a great wind, she answered without conscious volition:

"I love you, too, Fors."

THAT night was the first evening Martha had spent at home with Theodore since Fors' arrival at Cynia. Fors had to meet a very busy Cynia businessman downtown for

dinner and a discussion of terms on some materials he needed. So Martha shared Theodore's simple fare, and after supper they sat together in the bare-walled study room and talked.

"Fors talks about evolving life that can live in the Martian atmosphere," she said. "It can't be done, can it, Uncle Theodore?"

"I have learned not to say flatly that something can't be done," replied Theodore. "A century ago many men said we could not colonize Mars because of the problems involved in transporting supplies from Earth."

"I know. But what's the composition of the Martian atmosphere?"

"Ninety-six per cent nitrogen, about four per cent argon, less than one per cent carbon dioxide and traces of water vapour and oxygen," said Theodore promptly.

"Nitrogen won't support life, will it?"

"Not as we know it. But are you forgetting that Fors is the Desert Stalker? Are you forgetting he walks the desert himself without a helmet?"

"It isn't possible," she murmured. "There's a trick to it; because he breathes normally, just as you and I, inside the dome. He must have an oxygen supply with tubes going to his nose."

"Fors buys supplies of water and food to take back with him," said Theodore with a quirk of a smile. "But he never buys oxygen supplies, as the dome farmers do."

"You believe that he actually lives out there without oxygen? How could he?"

" 'If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed,' " quoted Theodore, " 'you will say to this mountain, "Move hence to yonder place," and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you.' Fors has a greater, deeper faith in himself than any man I've ever known."

"But you can't accept something like this as a matter of faith!" protested Martha.

"I can," answered Theodore quietly. "I happen to believe that a man called Peter actually walked on water until he faltered in his belief that he could."

After Theodore went to bed,

Martha sat up, reading, and waited for Fors to come home. Fors had his own small room in the House of Brotherhood, which Theodore always reserved against his unannounced coming; it was bare and simply furnished, as suited the nature of both men. Martha's room, by contrast, was spacious, and Theodore had obtained for it feminine comforts Martha had not realized could be found on Mars.

Near midnight Fors entered, a pre-occupied expression on his face. His blue eyes lighted on seeing Martha sitting in the study room.

"Fors, I want to talk to you," said Martha, rising.

"Let's walk in the garden," suggested Fors. "I need to get the kinks of business discussion out of my brain."

They went into the garden and sat down together on one of the stone benches. The night sky of Mars beyond the dome could not be seen, for the lights of Cynia dissolved the dome's transparency into a silvery shimmer that cast a faint, reflected illumination over the shadowed garden.

For the first time, Fors took Martha in his arms. For a star-streaked eternity, she was lost in the wonder of their first kiss. At last she disengaged herself and forced her mind to its quest.

"Fors, you're d e c e i v i n g Uncle Theodore and everyone else," she said sternly. "You can't breathe without oxygen, any more than any other man. Can you?"

"I can," he answered, smiling down at her. "I do."

"I think you have concealed oxygen tubes running to your nostrils when you walk in the desert," she accused. "If it isn't a trick, why don't you let Uncle Theodore and other scientists study you and test your metabolism and respiration?"

"As to 'other scientists,' I can answer easily. Most of them refuse to believe and want to make tests. But I'm not an experimental animal, and I have work of my own that's more important than proving myself to them. Theodore.....well, my refusal to let him make a few studies is a sort of game between us, I think. I expect that one of these days, when I have time,

I'll let Theodore do some experimenting. He should be able to write a paper from it that will make him famous, and perhaps put a few honest, non-conformist minds on the trail I'm following."

"I don't believe you," she said flatly. "It's impossible."

"No more so than fishes on Earth coming out of the water to breathe air millenia ago."

"It isn't the same. Air breathing and water breathing are both oxygen combustion."

"There are energy sources other than combustion," said Fors.

"Don't cite fermentation to me," she snapped. "It isn't efficient enough. Besides, you have only nitrogen to work with in the Martian atmosphere."

"How would atomic energy suit you?" retorted Fors, with a genuine grin.

She stared at him, dumb.

"The nitrogen from the air is bombarded in the cells with hydrogen from the body's carbohydrates," Fors explained. "This provides much more energy than simple chemical combustion, and creates carbon which is deposited for further use of the cells and helium which is returned to the lungs and exhaled."

"Your body mechanism isn't set up for such a process," she objected. "Besides, you have to have initial energy for such a reaction."

"No body mechanism is needed except the adjustment of the cells. The body cells of man are under the control of man's mind, and they will adjust as the mind of man instructs them. And the energy and guidance for the atomic reaction is channelled to the cells by the mind."

Martha was silent, trying to assimilate this.

"You're thinking," Fors added, "that the mind has no such precise control over the basic functions of the bodily mechanism. It can, if the belief and need are urgent enough. No one really knows the full capabilities of the human mind. Some conservative scientists will admit the authenticity of cases of telepathy and psychokinesis, and yet would react automatically against a new idea such as this one."

"I can't believe you, and yet I do," she said slowly, with a

weird sensation of awe at her own admission. "I understand scientists think there may be many minor mutations since man conquered space and exposed himself to heavier doses of cosmic rays. I suppose one of those mutations could alter the body chemistry to make such an adaptation possible."

"Cosmic ray mutation may have something to do with it," said Fors thoughtfully. "But you're wrong in thinking I'm a rare specimen. It can be done by others. You could do it."

"Oh, no!" she exclaimed. "Uncle Theodore, perhaps, but not I. I don't have that sort of belief in myself."

"Not Theodore, because Theodore is content to remain exactly what he is. No, being nothing more than human is part of Theodore's unconscious penance for being human. But, deep inside, you have a greater faith in yourself than you realize, Martha."

She said nothing, but crept into his arms.

She faced the appalling realization that Fors was but a restless visitor here in this dome-city, this bubble of air that meant life to her. His real world was the chill sweep of the Martian desert.

His world was a world alien to her. It was a world she could not enter, except as a protected stranger.

And, separated from him forever by the very breath of life, she loved him.

THAT being true, Martha decided she would put Fors out of her heart. It was the only solution. She would return to Earth soon and, with millions of miles between them, she could plunge into the busy hubbub of terrestrial life and mould this love into nothing more than an aching memory.

But if it was to become a memory, she determined it would be a precious one. Martha had the courage to agree with Tennyson that it is better to love and lose than not to love at all. While she was with Fors, she would yield to her love for him without restraint.....and, in truth, she was not sure she could have done otherwise had she chosen any other course.

Alas for this scheme of a grand, fleeting passion..... like so many other women,

Martha reckoned without the very definite ideas of her lover.

"I'm going back to the desert tonight," said Fors matter-of-factly two evenings later, as they sat with Theodore in the study room after supper.

The shock of his words congealed Martha's heart.

"Fors, you can't!" she cried in an excess of anguish. "I thought.....surely you're going to stay here until I leave for Earth?"

"No, because you aren't going back to Earth. I want you to come into the desert with me."

She almost breathed a sigh of relief. He wanted her, and the automatic feminine reaction to that was that his desire could be guided to conform to her way of thinking instead of his.

"You know that isn't possible, Fors," she said, calmly now. "My body isn't constructed so I can breathe nitrogen as you do. Stay here for a few days longer, and let's make the most of our love while we can."

Theodore looked at her curiously, but said nothing. She had not told her uncle of her love for Fors, but surely he must have suspected.

"I'm not that much of a defeatist," said Fors firmly. "There's nothing unique in the way my body's constructed. If there were, I probably couldn't breathe this oxygenated air under the dome. I was born as you are, and I adjusted myself through the efforts of my mind. You can, too."

This terrified Martha. She realized that Fors had not made the suggestion merely from idly wishing things could be that way, but was serious about it. She was terrified alike by the recognition that he was inflexible in his determination to leave that night, and by the almost overpowering urge to try to do as he wanted her to.

"Please, Fors!" she cried, ignoring Theodore's sensibilities. "Don't leave! You know I adore you, and I want these last few days with you. Isn't that better than nothing at all?"

Fors arose.

"Come, go through the airlock with me now, Martha," he said quietly. "The night is beautiful in the desert."

"No!" She shrank back against the hard reality of the bench. "Fors, you know I can't!"

Fors looked at her steadily, and there was no change in his expression.

"I must go to my room and pack for the trip," he said, and left them.

Martha looked desperately at her uncle. Theodore smiled gently at her.

"I can't help you, my dear," he said. "You and he are struggling in a world removed from me."

She jumped up and ran after Fors. She caught him in the long corridor. She grasped his arm and he stopped, silently.

"Fors," she urged, "come to my room."

"A woman's body is her ultimate weapon, isn't it?" he remarked. "I can say no, too, Martha."

He turned away and entered his room, shutting the door.

Martha fled to her room. For a while she waited. Then she wept.

SHE left her room and returned to the study room when she began to fear that Fors would go out into the night without seeing her again. Fors was packed and ready to leave, talking with Theodore.

"Why don't you put on a marsuit and walk a little way into the desert with Fors?" suggested Theodore.

Martha nodded mutely. She went to the locker in the corridor and pulled on the airtight suit. She returned to the study room, carrying the marshelmet under her arm.

"I could build a private dome, as the farmers in the lowlands do, and you'd be protected under that," Fors said to her as the three of them walked together through the garden. "But I won't. I love you, Martha, and you're the only woman I've known with the mind and heart to adjust as I have done. That adjustment is the future of humanity on Mars, and my life is tied to that future. As much as I want you with me always, I can't take you on any terms other than living in my world with me."

"At least give me credit for realizing you're right about that," she answered in a low voice. "I wouldn't go with you

on any other terms, Fors."

In the airlock, she donned her helmet. Theodore closed the inner door and exhausted the air from the chamber. Martha and Fors stepped out into the Martian night together, she in her protective suit, he exposed to the cold and rarified air.

The desert stretched away before them, bleak and chill and beautiful. As they walked away in long, easy strides, arm in arm, the dome-city dwindled behind them. Around them was vast silence, a sea of sand that stretched to incredibly near horizons under a deep violet, star-gemmed sky.

Cynia was a will-o'-the wisp on the northern horizon when Theodore's voice sounded in the earphones of Martha's helmet radio.

"I think you'd better come back now, Martha, if you aren't going on with him," said Theodore.

Martha stopped, and Fors halted at her tug.

"I must go back," she said.

"Take off your helmet, Martha," he said, his voice coming blurred to her through the helmet.

"Fors, I can't. Oh, I can't."

"Try."

She shook her head, biting her lip, fearful.

Fors put out his hands and touched the helmet clamps. She grasped his wrists to stop him, but her grip was limp. He unfastened the clamps and his hands dropped to his sides.

"It's up to you," he said.

She looked at him, standing there, breathing the desert air easily. Trembling, she put up her hands and lifted the helmet, hearing the air of Earth hiss out as the seal was broken.

Her lungs collapsed. She gasped, and the hostile air of the desert was sucked in like a poisonous gas. She was dizzy. She staggered and tried to cry out, but no sound came.

Frantically, she jammed the helmet back on her head and fumbled the clamps tight. The blessed oxygen pumped back into her body.

Fors looked at her with blue eyes.

"If only you loved me enough to believe....." he said sadly.

He turned and strode away,

his figure fading into the southern darkness.

Martha watched for a long time, but he did not reappear. Her shoulders slumped tiredly, and she turned back toward the distant city and began walking.

Above the bubble of light that was Cynia, bright Phobos moved visibly across the sky, casting shifting shadows on the desert. Deimos was a bright more-than-star hanging in the northeast. The desert was a beautiful realm of crystal fantasy, until it dissolved in her tears.

MARTHA hoped against her intuition that Fors would come back before she left Mars. She hoped he would come back and go back to Earth with her, that he would agree to settle down and live with her in Cynia, that he would consent to build a dome in which she could live with him in the desert.

Yet she knew that if he did any of those things, both of them would lose something irreplaceable. Fors had set his foot firmly on a strange path, and to divert him and cage him would destroy what he was. As it had been since time began, it would be wrong for the man to yield and adjust himself to the ways of the woman.

So the weeks passed empty, and the day came when she stood at the Cynia airport, west of the city dome, and embraced Theodore for the last time. In a few hours she would be in Mars City, boarding the G-boat that would take her to the spaceship back to Earth.

"I wish I could stay, Uncle Theodore," she said. They talked by helmet radio, for here they were under no dome.

"And not just because of me, either," commented Theodore with a smile.

"No," she admitted. "But this is the only thing I can do, isn't it?"

"Only you can answer that," replied Theodore.

She climbed aboard the broad-winged plane. The pilot sealed the door behind her and let air sing into the cabin. Both removed their helmets.

She was the only passenger and there was no co-pilot, for this plane normally carried only freight. The pilot, a freckle-faced young redhead,

winked at her and started his engines.

The plane raced down the runway and lifted slowly, heading southeastward over the desert. Far below and behind, as they climbed, she could see the tiny, waving figure of Theodore dwindle and vanish.

"Why are we going in this direction?" she asked.

"I have to take advantage of every wind to get airborne in this thin air, ma'am," answered the pilot. "When we get high enough, I'll swing it back toward Mars City."

Minutes later, still climbing slowly southeastward, there was a rasping cough, and the ship shuddered and vibrated with an ominous rumble. The pilot's hands raced frantically over his control board.

"Helmet on, ma'am!" he exclaimed urgently. "Something's wrong. We're going to have to crash-land."

She clamped the helmet on her head. The pilot was too busy fighting the controls to don his.

The plane turned and tilted, and out of her window Martha caught a glimpse of Cynia, a distant pinprick in the sunlight miles behind them. Then the nose went down abruptly, she pitched forward against her seat belt, and blackness hit her with the stunning impact of an explosion.

When consciousness returned, she was lying on the sand. Fors was bending over her, massaging her hands. Some distance away lay the crumpled wreckage of the plane.

"The pilot's dead," said Fors. "You don't seem to be hurt, except for bruises."

"How did you get here?" she asked wonderingly, sitting up.

"This isn't far from my place," said Fors. "I was doing some work in the desert, and the plane crashed not five miles from me. If it had been on Earth, it probably would have burned you up inside it before I could reach you."

"Well," she said, "the pilot reached Cynia by radio before we crashed, I think. Copters ought to get here before long."

"Yes," said Fors. "You can go back, and the airline will get you to Mars City in time to make the spaceship. Or you can stay here with me."

She shook her head. It ached abominably.

"We talked that out before," she said. "Nothing's changed."

Fors lifted an eyebrow.

"Take a deep breath," he commanded.

She did so, and favoured him with a puzzled look. The air was sweet and rare as wine inside her helmet, but it should be. Marsuits carried enough oxygen for several days.

Fors put an arm around her shoulders. She leaned against him, wishing this were not their last hour together, wishing she had not seen him again since she must but leave him once more.

His fingers were caressing her hair and the back of her neck and she tilted her head back gratefully against their loving pressure.

Caressing her hair! Through a helmet?

She gasped, and her hands flew to the back of her head. Her marshelmet was shattered. The entire back half of it was gone.

"It was that way when I found you," said Fors gently. "Perhaps you had to be unconscious to lose your fear and free your mind. You've been breathing the desert air since the crash."

She looked at him and smiled. She breathed deeply. The air was fragrant and clean, like the scent of clover.

With firm fingers, she unclamped the useless helmet and hurled it out across the sand. She put her arms around Fors' neck and turned her free lips up to his.

THE END

CASTAWAYS OF SPACE

by DAN MALCOLM

illustrated by ORBAN

It was McDermott's job to rescue the Robinson Crusoes of the star lanes — whether they wanted to be rescued or not. Sometimes these castaways wanted to stay lost

LIEUTENANT McDermott was having a couple of drinks in the Nine Planets Bar on Albireo XII when his wristband bleeped, telling him to report to Patrol headquarters for assignment. McDermott scowled. This was his time off, and he didn't give a damn *what* Headquarters said. He cupped his hand tightly around the drinkflask and took a long slug. The wristband bleeped again, impatiently.

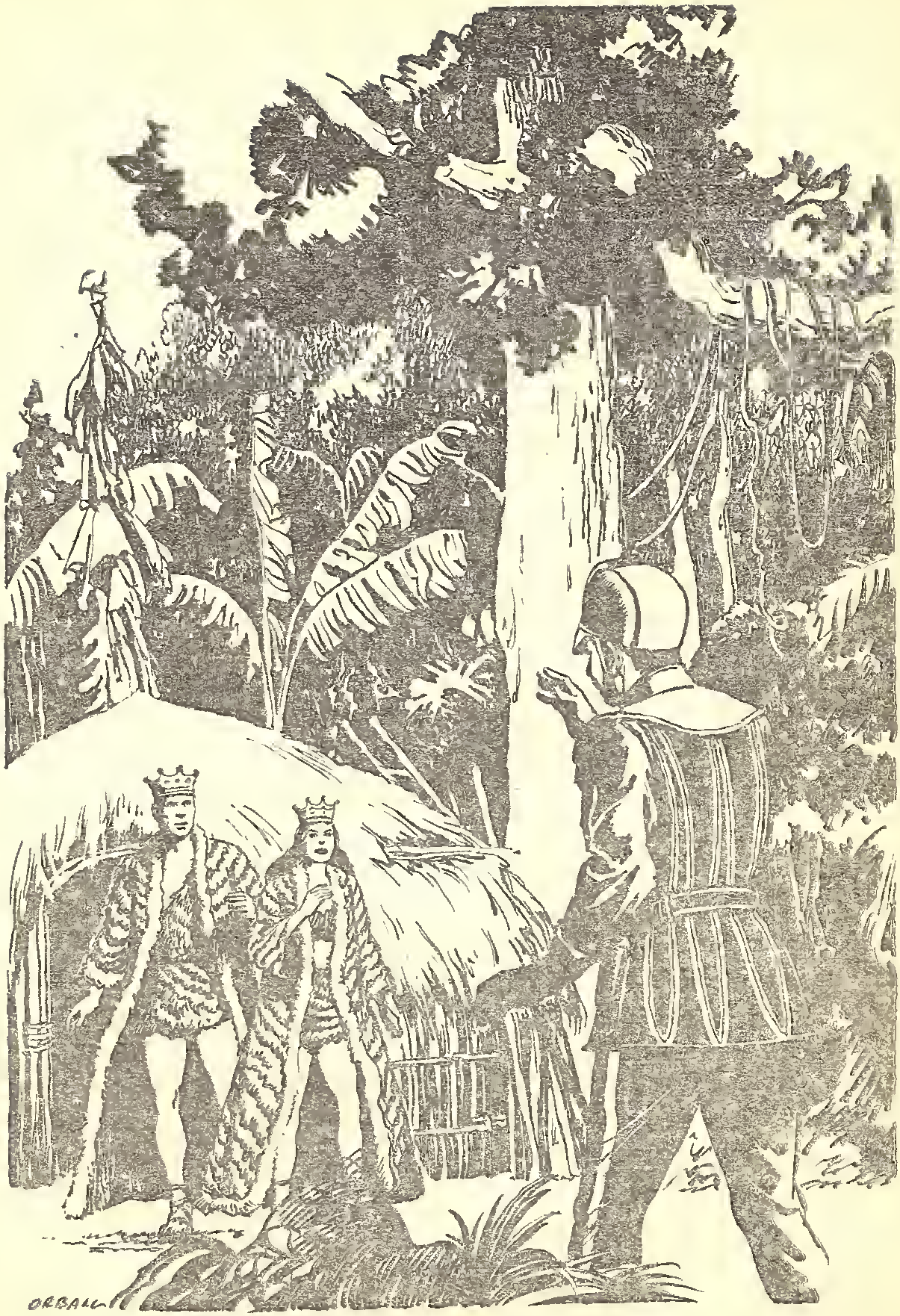
McDermott waited a minute or two and finished his drink. Then he switched the band to audio and said in a sour tone, "McDermott reporting. What is it?"

The thin, edgy voice of the Officer of the Day said, "Job for you, Mac. There's been a kidnapping and we want you to do the chasing."

"I'm off duty. Get Squires."

"Squires is in sick-bay having his head sewed back on," was the acid reply. "Get out of that bar and get yourself down here in five minutes or—"

The threat was unvoiced, but McDermott didn't need much persuasion. He knew his status as a Galaxy Patrol Corpsman was shaky enough, and a couple more black marks would finish him completely. He didn't like that idea. Getting booted out of the crime-prevention unit would mean he would


ORBAN

have to go back to working for a living, and at his age that wasn't nice to think about.

"Okay,' he rumbled. "Be right there."

He pulled a platinoid five-credit coin from his pocket, fingered its embossed surface lovingly for a moment, and spun it down on the counter. The bartender slid two small coppers back at him in change. Pocketing them, McDermott grinned apologetically at the gray-skinned Denebian floozie he had been making plans about until the call to HQ, and shouldered his way out of the bar. He walked pretty well, considering there was nearly five credits' worth of straight Sirian rum under his belt.

McDermott held his liquor pretty well. He was a big man, six-three and two hundred sixty pounds, and there was plenty of alcohol-absorbing bulk there to gobble up the stuff as he poured it down his throat.

His car, with the official nova-emblem of the Galaxy Patrol Corps, was sitting outside the bar. He tumbled into it, jabbed the start-button fiercely, and shot away from the curb. The trip to Headquarters took him twenty minutes, which was pretty good time considering that the building was halfway across town.

Sergeant Thom was at the night desk, a wizened little Aldebaranian who looked up as McDermott came through the door and said, "Better leg it upstairs, Mac. Davis is on tonight and he wants you fast."

"He's waited this long," McDermott said. "He can wait a little longer. No sense rushing around."

McDERMOTT took the gravtube upstairs and entered the Officer of the Day's cubbyhole without knocking. The O.D. was Captain Davis, a forty-year veteran of the Corps who lived a model life himself and who had several times expressed himself rather harshly on the subject of McDermott's drinking.

Now he looked at McDermott with an expression of repugnance on his face and said in his tight little voice, "I'm sorry to have found it neces-

sary to pull you off your free time, Lieutenant."

McDermott said nothing. Davis went on, "A matter has come up and at the moment you're the only man at this base who can handle it. A girl named Nancy Hollis has been kidnapped—an Earthgirl, visiting this world on a tour with her parents. The father is a big-wheel diplomat making a galactic junket. She was plucked out of her hotel room and carted away in a Model XV-108 ship by a man identified only as Blaine Hassolt of this city. Know him?"

McDermott shook his head.

Davis shrugged. "Well, no matter. The girl left a scribbled note and we got on the trail pretty fast after the snatch. Hassolt was heading outsystem with her and we slapped a spy-vector on the ship. We followed it as far as we could. It disappeared pretty fast and as far as we can compute it crashlanded on Breckmyer IV. We saw the ship in orbit around that world and we saw a small lifeship detach from the main and skedaddle down to the planetary surface. Lifeships land, but they don't take off. That means Hassolt and the girl are somewhere on Breckmyer IV. Get out there and find them, Mac."

Moistening his lips, McDermott said, "You're sure it's Breckmyer IV?"

"Yes."

"Oh."

McDermott knew that planet. It was a stinking hot one, whose moderate zones were intolerable and whose tropical zones were sheer hell. It was inhabited by primitive humanoids and there were no Terran settlements anywhere on the planet. He was being handed a lousy job, maybe even a suicide job. But the kidnapped girl's father was a big-wheel diplomat, and policy dictated making at least a token effort to get her off Breckmyer IV, if she had survived the landing. The Corps *had* to send someone down there to look around—and the least valuable member of the local base was a rumsoaked Corpsman named McDermott.

"You'll leave at once," Davis told him. "You won't stop at your bar for booze. You won't stop to take a shave.

You won't stop to do any old damn thing."

"Yes, sir," McDermott said stonily.

"We're fueling up a ship for you at the Corps port. It'll be ready for blasting in fifteen minutes. Heaven help you if you're late."

"I'll be there on time, sir."

"You'd better be."

McDERMOTT got to the spaceport in time for the blasting. He had made one tiny stop, at an all-night package store just outside the spaceport area, but Davis didn't have to know that. And the mass margin of the ship was a thousand pounds; nobody would mind if he brought a small brown bag containing a couple of bottles on board.

The ship was all ready for him. Under the floodlights the service flunkies bustled around, piping in fuel and checking the instruments. McDermott wondered why they were going to so much trouble. This was a sacrifice flight anyway; he wasn't going to find that girl in the jungle, and he'd be damned lucky if he ever got back alive after making a landing on Breckmyer IV.

But he didn't say anything. The groundside flunkies looked at him with the worship and wonder in their eyes, the way they looked at any full-fledged Corpsman no matter how seedy he was, how disreputable. As far as they were concerned, McDermott was a Corpsman, and the glamor of that rank eclipsed completely any incidental deficiencies of personality he might possibly have.

He climbed into the control cabin of the ship. It was an XV-110, a four-man ship with auxiliary boost. That would make landing and taking off on rough terrain easier, and there would be room for him to bring back both Hassolt and the girl if he could find them.

McDermott stowed his three bottles of rum in the grav-holder near the pilot's chair, headed to the galley and found a nipple-top in the galley stores. He opened one of the bottles, fastened the nipple to it, and took a quick slug. Then he strapped himself in for

blastoff position while the count-down went on outside.

"Ready for blast, Lieutenant McDermott."

"Ready," he snapped back.

The automatic pilot was ready to function, too. A glittering metallic tape dangled loosely from the mouth of the computer. McDermott knew that the tape would guide him faithfully through the hyperwarp across the eighteen light-years that separated him at the moment from Breckmyer IV. The trip would take a day and a half, ship time. If he budgeted himself properly, those three rum-bottles would see him through the round trip.

If there was a round trip.

"Blasting in eight seconds, Lieutenant."

"Check."

He touched his fingers to the control board and switched on the activator for the autopilot. From here on he was just so much baggage. The ship would fly itself without any help from him.

Reaching out, he made sure his precious rum was secure against blastoff. He leaned back, waiting. He knew no one gave much of a damn whether he reached Breckmyer IV safely or not, whether he found the girl safe and sound, whether he got back to the Albireo base. He was being sent out just for the sake of appearances. The Corps was making a gesture. Look here, Mr. Hollis, we're trying to rescue your daughter. See?

McDermott scowled bitterly. The last number of the count-down sounded. The ship rocked back and forth a moment and shot away into space. Eleven seconds after the moment of blastoff, the autopilot activated the spacewarp generator, and so far as observers on Albireo XII were concerned McDermott and his ship had ceased to exist.

A day and a half later, the autopilot yanked the ship out of warp, and in full color on the ship's screen was the system of Breckmyer—the big golden-yellow sun surrounded by its thirteen planets. McDermott had finished one full bottle of his rum, and the benippled second bottle was drained almost to its Plimsoll line, but he had had time to look up the Breckmyer system

in the ship's ephemeris anyhow.

Of the thirteen planets, only one was suitable for intelligent life, and that was the fourth. The first three were far too hot; the fifth through the eighth were too big, and the outer planets were too cold.

The fourth, though, was inhabited—by tribal-organized humanoids of a Class III-a civilization. There were no cities and no industries. It was a primitive hunting-and-agricultural world with a mean temperature of 85 in the temperate zones and 120 in the tropics. McDermott meant to avoid the tropics. If Hassolt and the girl had landed there, McDermott didn't intend to search very intensely for them. Not when the temperature was quite capable of climbing to 150 or 160 in the shade—and a hot, muggy, humid 160 at that.

He guided the ship on manual into an orbit round the fourth planet at a distance of three hundred thousand feet. That far up, the mass-detector would function. He could vector in on the crashed ship and find its whereabouts.

Snapping on the detector, he threw the ship into a steady orbit and waited. An hour later came the beep-beeping of a find; and, tuning the fine control on his detector plate, he discovered that he had indeed located the kidnap ship.

It had crashed in the temperate zone, for which McDermott uttered fervent blessings. The little lifeship had landed no more than a couple of miles from the stolen vessel. Presumably Hassolt and Nancy Hollis were somewhere in the neighborhood.

His subradio came to life and Captain Davis' thin voice said, "Come in, McDermott. Come in."

"McDermott here, sir."

"Any luck? Are you in orbit around the planet yet?"

"I'm in orbit," McDermott confirmed. "And I've found the ship, all right. It's down below me. I'm making ready for a landing now."

"Good luck," Davis said, and there wasn't much friendliness in his voice. "The girl's father sends his best wishes to you. He says he'll take good care of you if you bring his daughter back safely."

"Members of the Corps are not allowed to accept emoluments in the course of duty," McDermott recited tiredly, knowing that Davis was just testing him. "If I can find the girl I'll bring her back."

"You'd better," Davis said coldly. "There'll be all kinds of trouble if Senator Hollis' daughter doesn't get found."

The contact died. McDermott shrugged his shoulders and took another quick pull of the rum. It warmed his insides and buoyed him with confidence. Moving rapidly, he set up a landing orbit that would put his ship down not far from the crashed vessel.

He threw the relays back. Slowly his ship left its orbit and began to head groundward.

THE landing was a good one. McDermott had been in the Corps for fifteen years, and in that time you learned how to make a good landing in a spaceship. You have to learn, because the ones who didn't learn didn't last for fifteen years.

He fined the ship into a pinpoint area a mile or so broad, which is pretty much of a pinpoint from three hundred thousand feet up. Then he brought her down, aiming for the flattest spot, and by skilful use of the auxiliary boost managed to land the ship smoothly without crisping more than a few thousand square feet of the jungle with the exhaust of his jets.

His jungle kit was all ready for him—medications, a Turner blastgun, a machete, a compass, and such things. He slung it over his back and slithered down the dragwalk to ground level. He leaned against the ship and pushed, but it didn't rock. It was standing steady, its weight cutting a few inches into the ground. Good landing, he told himself. Hope takeoff is just as good.

The thermometer in his wrist-unit read 94 degrees, humidity 89 percent. It was clammily moist as he started out on his mission. His mass-detector told him that the crashed spaceship lay two and a half miles to the west, and he figured he had better start out from there in his search

for Hassolt and Nancy Hollis. The lifeship was somewhere further to the west; his portable detector was not powerful enough to locate it more definitely.

He began to walk.

McDermott was wearing regulation alien-planet costume: high boots and leatheroid trousers, thick teflon jacket, sun helmet. Because Breckmyer IV was a reasonably Earth-type planet, he did not need a breathing-mask.

The jungle all about was thick and luxurious. The plants went in for color here. Stout corrugated-boled palm trees rose all about him, and their heavy fronds, dangling almost to the jungle floor, were a blue-green hue ringed with notches of red. Creeping and clinging yellow vines writhed from tree to tree, while a carpet of flaming red grass was underfoot. The vegetation seemed to be sweating; beaded drops of moisture lay quivering on every succulent leaf.

McDermott walked. He had to cut his way through the overhanging thicket of vines with backhand sweeps of his machete every five or six steps, and though he was a big man and a powerful one he was covered with sweat himself before he had traveled a quarter of a mile through the heavy vegetation. He resisted the temptation to strip away his jacket and shirt. The forest was full of droning, buzzing insects with hungry little beaks, and the less bare skin he exposed the better.

He had seen what jungle insects could do to a man. He had seen swollen and bloated corpses, victims of the chollafly of Procyon IX, killed by a single sting. And though it was oven-hot here, McDermott kept his uniform on until it stuck to his body in a hundred places. Dead men didn't perspire, but he preferred to perspire.

Jungle creatures hooted mockingly all around. Once, twice he thought he saw a lithe figure shaped like a man peer at him from between two trees and slip silently off into the darkness, but he wasn't sure. He shrugged his shoulders and kept going. He wasn't interested in the native life. They were pretty skilled with

poisoned blow-darts on Breckmyer IV, he had been told. He felt an uncomfortable twitch between his shoulderblades, and pressed grimly on, cursing the man who had sent him out here to sweat.

An hour later he reached the wrecked spaceship. It had oxidized pretty badly in the atmosphere on the way down, and there wasn't much left of it. Certainly it could never take off. Hassolt would probably beg him to take him back to civilization, if he were still alive.

The lifeship had landed a mile further west, and that meant nearly thirty minutes of weary slogging. McDermott's breath was coming fast and he had to stop every few minutes to rest and mop the sticky sweat out of his eyes; it rolled down into his thick brows and dripped maddeningly onto his cheeks.

The lifeship sat on its tail in a little clearing. It had landed well. McDermott looked at it. The lifeships were hardly bigger than bathtubs—rocket-equipped bathtubs. They were big enough for two people, three if they were willing to crowd together, and they were capable of coming down through a planetary atmosphere and making a safe landing. That was all. They could not be used for taking off again, but they would get their occupants safely down.

McDermott stood by the lifeship a moment, loooking around. The grass was pretty well trampled here; a good sign of a village in the neighborhood. Most likely Hassolt and the girl were in the village.

He started to walk again. In ten minutes the village appeared, a nest of randomly-arranged huts on high stilts, circling loosely around the banks of a jungle stream. Advancing cautiously, McDermott saw a few of the natives, slim catlike humanoid creatures whose bodies were covered with a soft yellow fur. He made sure his blastgun was where he could reach it, and activated his verbal translator.

He stepped forward into the village.

TWO or three of the natives edged out from their huts

and came to meet him, padding silently over the beaten-down grass. There was no fear in their gleaming blue eyes, only curiosity.

McDermott started to say, "I'm looking for a couple of my people who crashlanded here."

Then he stopped.

An Earthman was coming out of the biggest and most magnificent hut in the village. He was grinning. He was a tall man, though not as tall as McDermott was, and his face was very thin, with hard angling cheekbones. He was wearing lustrous robes made from the hide of some jungle animal, thick, handsome robes. On his head he wore a kind of crown made from ivory.

"Are you Blaine Hassolt?" McDermott demanded.

The other nodded with easy familiarity. He spoke in a pleasant drawling voice. "I'm Hassolt, yes. And you've come to get me and bring me back?"

McDermott nodded.

Hassolt laughed. "How thoughtful of you!"

McDermott said, scowling, "I don't give a damn if you rot here or not, Hassolt. I'm here to get the girl. You can come back and stand trial or you can stay here in the jungle."

One of Hassolt's eyebrows rose quizzically. "I take it you're a Corpsman?"

"You take it right."

"Ah. How nice. There was a time when I was actually praying that we were being followed by a Corpsman—that was the time when the controls blanked out, and I had to crashland. I was very worried then. I was afraid we'd be cast away forever on some dangerous planet."

"You like it this hot?" McDermott asked.

"I don't mind. I live a good life here." Hassolt stretched lazily. "The natives seem to have made me their king, Lieutenant. I rather like the idea."

McDermott's eyes widened. "And how about the girl—Nancy Hollis?"

"She's here too," Hassolt said. "Would you like to see her?"

"Where is she?"

Instead of answering Hassolt turned and whistled at the big hut. "Nancy! Nancy, come

out here a moment! We've got a visitor."

A moment passed; then, a girl appeared from the hut. She, too, wore robes and a crown; underneath the robes her body was bare, oddly pale, and she made ineffectual attempts to conceal herself as she saw McDermott. She was about nineteen or so, pretty in a pale sort of way, with short-cropped brown hair and an appealing face.

"I'm Lieutenant McDermott of the Corps, Miss Hollis," McDermott said. "We put a spy-vector on Hassolt's ship and traced you here. I've come to take you back."

"Oh, have you?" Hassolt said before the girl could speak. "You haven't consulted *me* in this matter. You realize you propose to rob this tribe of its beloved queen."

McDermott's scowl tightened. He gestured with the blastgun and raised it to firing level. "I have a ship about three miles from here," he said. "Suppose you start walking now. In an hour or two we can be there, and in a day and a half we'll all be back safe and sound on Albireo XII."

"I don't want to be rescued," Hassolt said deliberately. "I like it here."

"What you like doesn't matter. Miss Hollis, this man forcibly abducted you, didn't he?"

She nodded.

"Okay," McDermott said. He nodded over his shoulder in the direction of the ship. "Let's go, Hassolt."

"Put the gun down, McDermott," Hassolt said quietly.

"Don't make trouble or I'll gun you down right now," McDermott snapped. "I'm more interested in rescuing Miss Hollis than I am in dragging you back to court."

"Miss Hollis will stay right here. So will I. Put the gun down. McDermott, there are four natives standing in a ring thirty feet behind you, and each one is holding a blowdart pipe. All I have to do is lift my hand and you'll be riddled with darts. It's a quick death, but it isn't a nice one."

McDermott's broad back began to itch. Sweat rolled in rivers down his face. He cautiously glanced around to his left.

Hassolt was right. Four slim

catlike beings stood in a semicircle behind him, blowpipe poised at lips. McDermott paused a moment, sweating, and then let his gun drop to the ground.

"Kick it toward me," Hassolt ordered.

McDermott shoved it with his foot toward the other. Hassolt hastily scooped it up, stowed it in his sash, and gestured to the aliens. Two of them slipped up behind McDermott and relieved him of his machete. He was now unarmed. He felt like an idiot.

Hassolt grinned and said, "Make yourself at home and keep out of trouble, McDermott. And remember that my bodyguards will be watching you all the time."

He turned and walked away, heading back toward the hut.

McDERMOTT stared after him; finally he muttered a brief curse and looked at the girl.

"I'm sorry I got you into this," she said.

"It's not your fault, Miss. It's mine. My fault for joining the Corps and my fault for taking this assignment and my fault for not shooting Hassolt the second I saw him."

"It would have done no good. The natives would have killed you immediately."

He looked around, at the village. Two or three natives skulked in the distance, ready to transfix him with darts if he showed any sign of trouble.

He said, "How did all this happen? I mean, Hassolt being king and everything?"

She shrugged. "I hardly know. I met him one afternoon at the Terran Club and he bought me a couple of drinks —I thought he was interesting, you know. So we went for a drive in his car, and next thing I knew he was forcing me aboard a ship and blasting off."

McDermott looked at her. "With what purpose in mind?"

"Ransom," she said. "He told me all about it as soon as we were in space. He was heading for the Aldebaran system, where he'd cable my father for money. If Dad came through, he was going to turn me over to the authorities and vanish. If Dad refused to pay, he'd—

take me with him as his mistress. But we were only a little distance from Albireo when I grabbed control of the ship and tried to head it back. I didn't succeed."

"But you did foul up the controls so thoroughly that Hassolt had to abandon his original idea and crashland the ship here?"

"Yes. We came down in the lifeship and the natives found us. Hassolt had a translator with him, and it turned out they wanted us to be their king and queen, or something like that. So we've been king and queen for the past few days. The natives do everything Hassolt says."

"Do they obey you too?"

"Sometimes. But I'm definitely second-fiddle to him."

McDermott chewed at his lip and wished he had brought his remaining bottle of rum along. It was a nasty position. Far from being anxious to be rescued, Hassolt was probably delighted to live on Breckmyer IV. He wasn't willing to leave, and he wasn't willing to let Nancy Hollis go either. Nor was he going to let McDermott escape alive and possibly bring a stronger Corps force to rescue the girl.

He eyed the blowpipers speculatively. Unarmed as he was, he didn't dare risk trying to escape, with or without the girl. The ship was too far from the village, and beyond a doubt the natives would know shortcuts and could easily head him off at Hassolt's command.

Sneaking up behind Hassolt was equally impossible. As king, Hassolt was thoroughly guarded. Belting him from behind and making a run for the ship with the girl would be sheer suicide.

McDermott sat down on a grassy rise in the turf.

"What are you going to do?" the girl asked. She was looking at him in the starry-eyed way that teenage girls were likely to look at Corpsmen who came to rescue them from alien planets. She didn't seem to realize that this particular Corpsman was overage, overweight, and didn't have the foggiest idea of how to rescue either her or himself.

"Nothing," McDermott

said. "Nothing but wait. Maybe some other ship will come after *me*. But I doubt it."

McDERMOTT spent the next few hours wandering around the village. Evidently some sort of council-meeting was going on in Hassolt's hut; McDermott heard the sounds of alien words from time to time.

The blowpipers ringed in the village. There was no way out. He wondered if Hassolt intended to keep him prisoner indefinitely.

No, that was unlikely, McDermott, as a Corpsman, was a potential danger to Hassolt at all times. Hassolt undoubtedly would get rid of him as soon as the business at hand was taken care of.

And the girl was looking at him so damned *hopefully*. As if she pegged her life on a serene inner confidence that the Corpsman was going to engineer her rescue somehow.

Somehow.

The afternoon was growing late and the big golden sun was sinking in the distance when one of the aliens came noiselessly up to them, and proferred each of them a bowl of some sort of liquid.

"What is it?" McDermott asked, sniffing the contents of the bowl suspiciously.

"Something alcoholic," she said. "They make it out of fermented vegetable mash. Hassolt drinks it and says it's okay."

McDermott grinned and sampled it. It was sweet and musky-tasting, not at all bad. And potent. Two bowlsful this size could probably keep a man in a pleasant alcoholic stupor half a day.

He finished the bowl off hurriedly and realized that the girl was looking at him in surprise and—was that disgust? Her image of him as a superboyscout was fading fast, he thought. He had guzzled the liquor just a bit too greedily.

"Good," he said.

"Glad you like it."

He started to make some reply, but he heard an approaching footfall behind him, and turned. It was Hassolt. He was holding McDermott's blastgun tightly in his hand and his face had lost the sophisticated,

mocking look it had had earlier. It seemed drained of blood now, a pale white sickly color. It was pretty plain that Hassolt had just had a considerable shock. Something that had rippled him to the core.

He said, in a voice that was harsh and breathy, "McDermott, how far is your ship from here?"

McDermott grinned. "Three miles. Three and a half, maybe. More or less due east."

Hassolt waggled the blast-gun. "Come on. Take me to it."

"Right now?"

"Right now."

McDermott stared levelly at the kidnapper for an instant, and let some of the euphoria induced by the alien drink leave his mind. Narrowing his eyes in unbelief, he said, "Are you serious?"

"Stop wasting time. I want you to take me to the ship *now*."

The girl was staring in bewilderment at him. McDermott said, "You sure got tired of the kinging business fast, Hassolt. You loved it here two hours ago."

"I didn't know two hours ago what I know now. You know what they do to their king and queen at the end of the year? They throw them into a live volcano! It's their way of showing thanks to the volcano-god for having brought them safely through the year. Then they pick a new king and queen."

McDermott started to chuckle. "So its' the old savage story, huh? Treat you like a king for a year and chuck you to the lava!"

"I happened to come along a few days after the old king and queen had been sacrificed," Hassolt said. "Usually they choose the new ones from their tribe, but they prefer to have strangers. Like the girl and me."

McDermott continued chuckling. "But what's your hurry? If the new year's only a few days old, you have plenty of time."

"I don't care to stick around. Take me to your ship now, McDermott."

"Suppose I don't?"

Hassolt stared meaningfully at the gun. McDermott said

calmly, "If you shoot me, I can't guide you to the ship, can I?"

Tightly Hassolt said, "In that case I'd find it myself. You can either take me there and stay alive, or refuse and die. Take your choice."

McDermott shrugged. "You have me there. I'll take you."

"Let's go, then. Now."

"It's late. Can't you wait till morning? It'll be dark by the time we get there."

"Now," Hassolt said.

"How about the girl?"

"She stays here," Hassolt said. "I just want to get away myself. The two of you can stay here. I'm not going to take any more chances. That she-devil wrecked the other ship."

"So I guide you to my ship and let you blast off, and I stay here and face the music?"

"You'll have the girl. Come on now," Hassolt said. His face was drawn and terror-pale.

"Okay," McDermott said. "I'll take you to the ship."

HE could understand Hassolt's jittery impatience. The natives might not like their king taking a runout powder, and Hassolt intended to get out while he still could. His ransom project didn't matter, now; having found out what the real function of the king was on this planet, he wanted off in a hurry, at any cost.

Which, McDermott reflected, leaves me and the girl here. And I'm the substitute king.

And a boiling volcano waiting for me at the end of my year-long reign, he thought.

They left the girl behind in the village and slipped off into the thick jungle as the first shadows of night began to descend. McDermott led, and Hassolt, following behind him, made it plain that he was keeping the gun not very far from the small of McDermott's back all the time. The Corpsman hacked stolidly forward into the jungle, retracing his steps.

"It was only three miles, you say?"

"Maybe four," McDermott replied. "Don't worry, Hassolt. I'll take you to the ship. I'd rather be a live coward than a dead hero."

They pressed on. After a while they passed the lifeship

and the wreckage of the mother ship, and McDermott knew they were on the right path. The sun dropped below the horizon; the sky darkened, and two small jagged moons, bright and pitted, drifted into the sky. The air was cooler now, McDermott thought of the girl, back at the village. And of the volcano.

"You thought you had a pretty good deal, eh, Hassolt? Servants and food and booze and a girl, all set up for the rest of your life. You don't think you might have gotten tired of it after a while?"

"Shut up."

"But then they let you know what was waiting for you, and you decided to run out. Lucky for you that I came along with my nice shiny ship," McDermott said. He was thirsting for a drink of any kind.

Half an hour later, they reached the ship. McDermott turned and saw Hassolt staring at it almost lovingly. He said, "You know how to operate it?"

"I'll manage. You come aboard and show me."

They boarded the ship, which stood silently in the forest as night descended. Hassolt prowled around, looking at the controls. It was obvious to McDermott that the kidnapper was not familiar with the XV-110 model.

He turned to Hassolt and said, "Look here—you don't know how to run this ship and I do. Why don't you let me stay on board as pilot?"

Hassolt chuckled. "You think I'm crazy? Take a Corpsman aboard? Look, that girl wrecked the other ship, and I'm going to travel in this one alone. Show me which button to push and then clear off."

"That's definite, huh?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. Come here."

He led Hassolt to the control panel and gave him a brief rundown on the operation of the ship. The beady-eyed kidnapper took it all in with deep interest.

The rum-bottle was still sitting in the grav-holder next to the pilot's seat, where McDermott had left it for consumption on the return journey. In the darkened ship, it looked like some control lever to the left of the chair.

"Now, this lever over here," McDermott said.

He grasped the bottle firmly as if it were a control. Suddenly he ripped it from its holder and in the same motion swung it back into Hassolt's skull. The bottle broke with a loud crack, and Hassolt dropped to the ground as if poleaxed. McDermott bent over him and took the blast-gun from his hands. Hassolt was still breathing.

Tenderly he scooped Hassolt up and dragged him out of the ship, across the clearing, and propped him up against a tree outside of the firing-range. Then McDermott stood for a long moment, thinking.

It was dark now. Jungle-beasts honked and hooted in the night. It was a seven-mile hike round trip back to the village to get the girl, and when he got there he probably would be swarmed over immediately and held. By now the natives probably had discovered that their king and the newcomer had vanished. They wouldn't let him slip out of sight a second time.

McDermott shook his head regretfully. He climbed back into the ship and readied it for blastoff.

Too bad about the girl, he thought. But it was suicide to go back to get her.

He thought: it wouldn't be such a bad life—for a while. He'd be waited on hand and foot, and there'd be plenty of that pungent liquor, and of course he would have the girl. But at the end of the year there would be the volcano waiting for both of them.

Better that one of us should escape, he thought. Too bad about the girl. I'll tell Davis that the lifeship blew up on landing, and that both of them were killed and their bodies beyond salvage.

You ought to go back and get her, something said inside him. But he shook his head and began setting up the blasting pattern. If he went back, he'd never get a second chance to escape. *No boy-scout stuff, McDermott; you're too old for that. Pull out while you can.*

And Hassolt and the girl would meet the volcano in a year. He shrugged sadly and

jabbed down on the button that activated the jets.

The ship sprang away from Breckmyer IV. McDermott felt a pang of sadness for the girl, and then forgot her. The rescue mission had failed; leave it at that. His chief regret was that he had needed to use the bottle of rum to club down Hassolt. It was the last bottle. It was going to be a long dry voyage back to Albireo, McDermott thought mournfully.

THE END

POWER FROM THE SUN

Another scientific dream has been fulfilled with the development of a device that can directly convert the chemical energy of gases into electricity. Using hydrogen and oxygen as fuel, a newly-developed chemical fuel cell can economically produce thousands of watts of power.

The cell consists of a number of specially catalyzed hollow porous carbon electrodes in a sealed cell containing a solution of the electrolyte potassium hydroxide. Hydrogen and oxygen are allowed to enter. At the hydrogen electrode the electrochemical reaction with the potassium hydroxide produces water and releases an electron. The electron flows through an electrical circuit, returning to the cell at the oxygen electrode.

The cell is capable of delivering one kilowatt of power from a unit one cubic foot in volume. Its main use may be in conjunction with utilization of solar energy.

A chief problem in using the energy of the sun is the storage of power. During sunny periods, the energy of the sun could be used to decompose water into oxygen and hydrogen, to be used later in the chemical cell.

THE GREAT WHITE GODS

by WYNNE N. WHITEFORD

illustrated by ORBAN

It was the first contact between the men of Earth and the strange super race from beyond the stars. But how would this race judge men from Earth? By their deeds?

ALL through the long afternoon, the rain pelted down into the sweltering jungle. Hart's little four-wheel-drive truck skidded maliciously on the muddy track, and it took all his concentration to keep it from sliding into one of the streaming ditches. Yet the urgency of fear compelled him to drive fast.

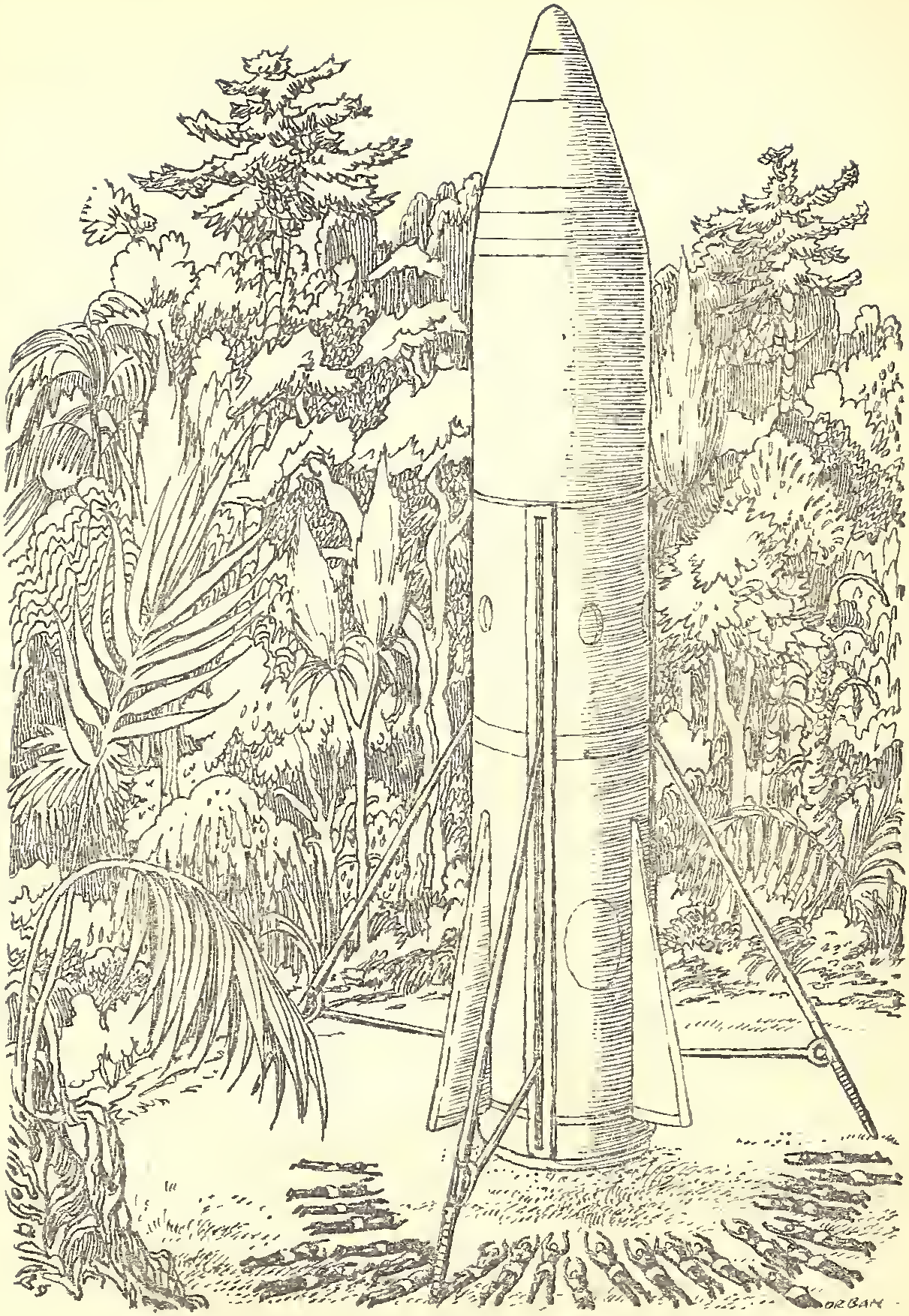
Every bend of the track brought the same view as the others—vast, towering trees, their pallid trunks spearing up hundreds of feet into the mist of falling rain. The dense, impossible vegetation, vegetation like nothing on the face of the Earth, primitive as a Carboniferous coal forest.

Now and then he passed through native villages, their wooden buildings glistening with rain-wet resin paint. Brown figures clustered in the doorways.

Unexpectedly, a final twist of the road brought him out of the jungle into the broad, open area of the Port, its edges bordered with black tree-trunks where the clearing fire had ended. He drove along the level, hard-rolled road between the fields of cane, and pulled up under the carport of the official residence.

Clayton met him at the door, his thin hair plastered damply to his forehead. "Come in and have a drink, Doc?"

The biologist nodded briefly as he sprang from the truck.



Indoors, only the endless movement of the fans made the steamy air b r e a t h a b l e. Through the venetian blinds the sunlight burned with a fierce w h i t e n e s s. "Where's Brandon?" he asked.

"Knocking sense into some of the boys. They wanted to stop work."

Glass in hand, Hart walked across to the window, lifting a slat of the blind to peer through. Across the level clearing of the Port, one of the Company ships stood on its fins, an immense steel shell, needle-nosed, higher than a thirty-story building. The loading gantry looked slender, almost flimsy beside it, with the lightness of all low-gravity structures.

"We're playing this the wrong way, Clay," said Hart.

"What the hell do you mean?"

"The whole project. We jumped into it too quickly." He gestured with his glass towards the line of brown native buildings on the far side of the Port. "It was their world. We should have w a i t e d, learned a bit about them before we forced our way of life on them."

"With these hills full of thorium? We had to have a labor force to get it out, didn't we?" Clayton broke off as the door opened and a thickset man stamped into the room, shaking the rain out of his hair. "What's your angle on it, Reg? The Doc thinks we should leave the place to the Ulni."

Brandon looked at Hart with undisguised hostility. "What the devil do *you* know about it?"

Hart's eyes narrowed as he swept his fingers through his hair. "I know I've spent only six months here. But at least I've made some headway in understanding the Ulni—and that's more than anyone else has done in the five years since the first landing."

Brandon poured himself a drink. "Animals," he said with an air of finality. "That's all they are—animals. They don't keep any written records. Nothing." He drained his glass and wiped the back of his hand across his sweating forehead. He pulled the cord of the venetian blind, flooding the room

with the harsh pale daylight. "Look what we've done for them, man. Put them forward a thousand years. When we came, they had only a few vegetable plots to keep them alive."

"So?" said Hart sourly.

"Look. Ten thousand acres under cane—and the stuff produces more than sugar-cane. Do you know, we've built forty-eight alcohol-burning engines in our workshops so far. Got them driving trucks, tractors, sawmills, g e n e r a t i n g plants, all running on the alcohol we distil from the cane. We get the thorium, sure. But we've given them the beginning of a self-supporting machine economy."

Hart turned. "Damn it all, show a bit of imagination. You're dealing with an alien form of life. Product of a different evolution. This was too big a thing for the Company Board of Directors to decide. Think of this: you got this world very easily, didn't you?"

"Sure," Brandon snorted. "They let us walk right in."

"Do you know why?"

Brandon threw his head back. "Yes. Because we had guts. Knew what we wanted, and didn't let a bunch of subhumans stand in our way."

THE biologist shook his head. "It was luck more than anything else. The same sort of luck that let the Spanish Conquistadores overthrow the Incas."

"What the hell are you driving at?"

"Listen. When the Spaniards went into South America, the local people thought they were the old Aztec gods—there was a legend they'd return from over the sea."

"So?"

"So they had their conquest easily. You've been just as lucky. I've been digging into the legends of the Ulni. They're quite intelligent, you know. It's a hard intelligence to measure, because its bases are so different from ours. For instance, our thinking is mainly visual—theirs is auditory. They haven't good vision—look at their faceted eyes—but their auditory memory is better than ours. Look how quickly they picked up our language."

"Like parrots. I still say they're animals."

"But listen. Think what it means to have an auditory rather than a visual-based intelligence. It puts them at a disadvantage in many ways, yes. They can't build up reference libraries, or make blueprints for complicated machines. But I wouldn't say they were necessarily inferior—only different."

Clayton yawned. "We've got away from the Spaniards and the Incas. Where was that leading to?"

"I'm coming to that. The Ulni have one very deep rooted legend; I keep coming across it again and again. It's a legend of some beings they call The White Ones, or sometimes The Swift Ones. According to the story, they come from the sky, at certain long intervals of time. They identified *you* with *them*—that's what confused them all when your first ship arrived. It had come before the Time."

Brandon looked steadily at Hart for a few seconds, as though trying to make up his mind whether he was telling the truth or not. Then he shrugged his shoulders.

The biologist mopped the sweat from his face and neck, and moved closer to one of the fans. "They have shrines to the White Ones here and there. And more than that: they have relics."

"Well?"

Hart took something out of his pocket. It looked like a flat disc of metal. "You know the Ulni have no written language, don't you?"

"That's right."

"Then tell me what you make of *that*." He threw the metal disc on the table. Brandon picked it up. About five inches in diameter, with a small hole in the center, it was a plate of pale yellow, iridescent metal, light in weight, with a graduated scale running round its rim. And against the scale were outlandish black letters or figures.

Brandon weighed the thing in his palm. "Where did you get it?"

"In one of the Shrines of the White Ones. The story is that it came from one of their ships from the sky." He pointed to the disc. "I'd say it was the dial of some sort of gauge.

But what are the figures?"

Clayton moved alongside Brandon, and they both studied the disc in silence for some seconds. Then the thick-set man shrugged his shoulders again. "It only means that some other ship has landed here before us." He gestured angrily with the disc. "This doesn't mean a thing. Everyone who operates a space ship doesn't speak English, you know. After all, there's a Brazilian fleet. Another from Japan."

Hart shook his head. "Better try again. Do those marks look like Japanese?"

The two Company men said nothing.

"Another thing," said Hart. "Count the graduations. Whoever, or should I say whatever made that thing counted on a duodecimal system. Rather a basic difference, isn't it?"

"Listen!" broke in Clayton.

IT came from a long way off —the eerie wailing of some kind of wind instrument.

"They've been playing those things every day and night for a week."

"They signal that way," said Hart. "I've learned some of it." He listened for a minute. "They're saying the Time is nearly at hand."

"The Time?" Clayton looked uneasy. "You mean—"

Hart nodded. "The Time for the White Ones to return."

Brandon walked across to the door. "Lot of balderdash." He glared across at the wooden buildings of the antive town. When he turned, he passed his tongue across his lips.

"Lot of blasted rot," he roared, looking ferociously at Hart. "Look at our own legends, back on Earth. They're full of imaginary visitations from the skies. Flaming dragons landing from above, and belching men out of their insides, or things like men. That's the oldest myth in the world."

Hart looked from Brandon to Clayton, and back again. "Maybe you're right. But have you thought of it this way? Suppose some of those things were *not* myths."

"Eh?" asked Brandon. He opened his mouth to speak, then shut it again as the idea took hold. It was Clayton who broke the silence.

"I could do with a drink," he announced. The neck of the bottle rattled against the glass. "Y'know," he said over his shoulder. "He could be right, Reg. We've learned to fly through space. Right. So we think we're God almighty. We put bases on the Moon. On the deserts of Mars. On Venus, Titan, Alpha Centauri 3, and on out to Altair. Then here. And wherever we find life, we've found nothing to stand up to us." He tossed the drink down his throat with practised quickness. "That is, not yet. Are you with me?"

"Go on," said Brandon.

"We haven't really come far from home, have we?" Clayton gestured vaguely. "Twenty-odd light-years—that's the limit of our spread. As far as Altair toward the Hub, as far as Sirius the other way. And from here to the Hub of the Galaxy it's—how far, Doc?—something like forty-thousand light-years, isn't it? With an estimated thousand million planetary systems."

"We'll spread over the lot, some day," said Brandon. "Not us—but our descendents."

Clayton groped for the bottle, refilling his glass without turning away. "Suppose something else has been doing a bit of expanding? Remember that blue metal tripod somebody found on top of a mountain on Altair 5? Made everyone think, when I was a kid; but no-one ever came up with an answer. Or that plastic handle off something that was never traced, lying on a beach on one of the Centauri planets—remember it on the video? Plastic as hard as steel, with grips for six fingers and a thumb, only when you got your fingers on the grips your thumb wouldn't come within inches of the thumb grip. Nobody makes a thing like that for a joke. Carve it out of wood or ivory, maybe—but pressure-mold it out of plastic? Not the way I see it."

"Ah, those things were fakes," snorted Brandon. "A journalist'll do anything to sell news."

"He could be right, you know," said Hart, looking at Brandon.

Brandon glared from one to the other. "What's the matter with you guys? Letting these pipes get on your nerves?"

"Just a minute." Hart held up his hand, listening. The weird notes had changed their rhythm. A strange crescendo was repeated over and over—then silence.

"What was that?" asked Brandon.

Hart seemed to have to make a conscious effort to unclamp his jaws to speak. "The Time," he said. "The Time is here."

The silence was heavy and ominous. The rain had stopped, and only the faint splashing of rivulets broke the stillness—that, and the occasional cry of some half-reptilian thing in the jungle. Then the three men became aware of another sound, almost at the same moment. Thin and high, a sound almost too high to be heard, wavering down the scale in an uncanny whistle. It seemed to come across an immense distance.

"What the devil's that?" roared Brandon. The three of them made for the door. Outside, they became aware of the murmur of alien voices from the native town. Brown figures danced, whirling in frenzy, limbs flailing.

"Look!" Hart jumped at the explosive tension in Clayton's voice. Their eyes followed his shaking finger. Then they saw it, high up across a clear belt of sky, above and beyond a rift in the dense masses of cloud. A thin, fine line of white. The line of a high-altitude vapor trail. The vapor trail of some high-flying machine. Not a space ship—they didn't land like that, and in any case none were due. Not a plane—there were none on the planet. But *something* had flashed across above the clouds, something that moved high and fast.

Hart began to stride towards his truck. "I'm getting out of here," he said. "Remember, I'm warning you. Something big's going to happen."

Brandon took a couple of steps towards him, then stopped. "I'm staying here." His manner changed. "Look: we've acted the way we thought was right. Taking the thorium doesn't matter—the Ulni have no use for it. And we showed them the right way to live."

Hart started his motor. "Save it up," he said. "You haven't got to explain it to *me*."

HE drove away along the road of hard-packed earth, straight in to the jungle at right angles to the river. Soon, the road was climbing through the trees, a ledge hugging the mountain side. Up, up towards the dense rain-forest of the plateau.

And then, as he was driving along a straight stretch of the road, something huge and metallic whipped across the strip of sky ahead of him, where the trees lining the road didn't quite meet. He had only the briefest glimpse of it—something slanting down through the air towards the Port.

Further on, Hart stopped where the road angled round a spur of the mountain, giving him a view of most of the Port. He saw the Company ship standing on its three fins beside the gantry, but even as he looked a bright light sparkled like a welding arc at the base of one of the fins. The fin glowed red-hot, crumpling like sheet tin as the whole massive bulk of the three-hundred-foot ship toppled ponderously over, crashing to the ground with a reverberating boom.

Lightning blazed with a white ferocity across the radar aerials and the tower of the transmitting station, leaving them a mass of twisted girders and fused wire. Then Hart saw the newly arrived ship.

It was like nothing he had ever seen. A flattened, fish-shaped thing with angular fins, hovering in the air as though it weighed nothing, with a shimmering unreality about it as though he were looking at it through some kind of force field.

Brandon and Clayton, on their way to their ship, had halted in the field of young cane, a couple of ants in the distance. A cone-shaped beam of light from the hovering ship shone down over them, barely visible in the sunlight, and where it touched the canefield a circle of flame blasted a ring of smoking blackness. The ring held the two men trapped in its center.

Then Hart noticed the brown hordes of the Ulni streaming from their town. They flung themselves prostrate within a few hundred yards of the ship, lifting and bowing their bodies in a kind

of ecstasy. A kind of ramp ran down drom the ship, glowing like a flattened beam of light.

Three figures walked down, the center one a little ahead of the others, and at the foot of the luminous ramp they halted. They were a long way from Hart, but he could see that there was something strange about them. Manlike, yet very tall and long-limbed and quick-moving, with large, rounded heads. They seemed to be nearly naked and white, as though they had brilliantly white skin, like shark-skin. Or it may have been close white fur.

The leader gestured, and something like glass or metal flashed in his hand. The cone of light disappeared. Brandon and Clayton began to walk slowly towards the trio, looking squat and clumsy.

Hart sprang back into his truck.

This was history. The Battle of the Hellespont, the signing of the Magna Carta, Hiroshima—all these past landmarks were nothing to this. This was the first meeting between races that had evolved in different parts of the Galaxy, fighting their separate ways upwards from the intertidal slime to the boiling swamps, from forest to plain, from villages to cities, from the conquest of the sea to the conquest of the stars.

And these others—the White Ones—were they further along the line? Suddenly he swung the truck around and headed back for the Port. Dangerous —but it was a risk he had to take.

Whoever they were, whatever they were, right now they were forming their first opinion of the human race. They were modelling their picture of a human being on Brandon and Clayton....

He couldn't let it stay like that....

Then his world disappeared in a flash of light. As he died, Hart knew that the White Ones had formed their opinion. They had judged. They had acted. It was..... THE END

INVASION

by A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

For generations they had wandered about the universe looking for a planet on which to settle. And now at long last they seemed to have found a suitable home

ROGEREZ and Suset were in their tiny cabin, about to retire, when the bulkhead speaker coughed twice and then began to talk in a crisp, authoritative voice.

"This is the Captain speaking," it said. "The Department of Astrophysics has just informed me that the star that we are approaching has a family of ten planets, as well as many satellites and planetoids. It is possible that our voyage is over. In any case, we have been ordered by the Commodore to make the preliminary investigations. If our findings are hopeful, the Main Fleet will be diverted to this system. All departmental heads will report at once to Control. That is all."

Rogerez, who was half way out of his trunks, pulled them on again. He got back into the shirt that carried the silver, crossed-quill pens on its epaulettes. He slid his feet into his sandals. Suset sat on the bunk and watched him. Her thin, fine-featured face was thoughtful and serious under the pale yellow hair.

"Rog," she said, "do you think that this is the real thing this time?"

"It could be," he said. "It could be."

She smiled faintly. "But you're the Chronicler, and you keep the records, and you have access to the records of the Chroniclers before you. You could tell me just how many sterile balls of rock or mud or water we've investigated since the beginning of the exile."

"I could," he said. "I advise you, Sue, not to get any false hopes."

"But the Captain said that it was possible that our voyage was over," she said. "What will it be like to live on the surface of a planet, with room to stretch? What will it be like to have all the food we want, instead of rations, all the water we want? What will it be like to be a real gardener, a real farmer, not a bio-chemist dabbling with seeds and shoots in tanks full of chemicals? What will it be like to be able to have children when we want to, not when some damned committee decides that it's our turn to be parents?"

"I hope," he said, "that you find out, that *we* find out. But I must get along to Control."

"One departmental head in the family is one too many," she said, smiling. "I wish that you could stay with me, to hear the news as it's released."

"So do I," he said.

He kissed her briefly, opened the door and almost ran out into the alleyway.

HE was the last to reach Control.

All the others were already there—Captain Maris, Kane, the Chief Officer, Blish and Katt, the two Chief Engineers, Crandell, the Communications Officer, Deel, who commanded the ground forces, Hayn, the Surgeon, Pamel, the Bio-Chemist, Claver, the Purser, Keen, the Astro-Physicist.

Rogerez stood in the doorway looking at them, at the men and women who were the rulers of this little, man-made world. He looked beyond them to the banked instruments and controls, to the big screens upon which the stars were, to the layman, meaningless swirls and eddies of light against the blackness. He tried to get the *feel* of the occasion, began to toy with the phrases that he would use when writing his official account.

"Sit down, man!" snapped Captain Maris.

"Don't interrupt his train of thought, sir," said Pamel cattily. "Who knows what beautiful, purple prose is running through his mind?"

Rogerez glared at her, but said nothing. After all, she was Suset's chief and could make life hard for her. He took his seat at the foot of the long conference table. It's been worn shiny, he thought, by the el-

bows of the generations... It's old, and the ship is old, and we are growing old with her. Will there never be an end to this voyaging?

"Keen," said the Captain, "tell us of your findings."

"With your permission," said the Astro-Physicist, "the interstellar drive was shut down, and observations made. The tenth, ninth, eighth, seventh, sixth and fifth planets seem to be utterly incapable of supporting life as we know it. It would be barely possible to establish a colony on the fourth planet. We have not yet been able to decide whether or not the second planet is suitable. The first planet would be most unsuitable."

"Come to the point, man!" said Colonel Deel impatiently.

"On my own time, Deel," replied Keen. "After the preliminary observations, our attention was concentrated upon the third planet. Its mass is almost identical with that of the home world, so is the relative distribution of land and water. The same may be said for atmospheric density and composition."

"Is it inhabited?" asked Deel.

"There is life," replied the scientist. "Pamel will bear me out on that."

"Is there intelligent life?" asked the soldier.

"That does not concern us yet, Deel," said Captain Maris. "My instructions from the Commodore are to make the preliminary survey from a safe orbit. No landing is to be attempted until the arrival of the Main Fleet. If there is intelligent life we shall not strike until we are ready."

"Need there be war, Captain?" asked Hayn. "Might it not be possible to establish friendly relations with the natives?"

"Was it possible," asked Maris, "when the Glormingen landed on our home world? Between different races there is only one possible state of affairs—war. Our world was taken from us by force—we shall take a new world by force."

"I am ready," said Deel quietly. He looked around the table, a small, hard smile on his hard face. He sees us all carrying guns, manning his artillery, thought Rogerez. After

years of playing at soldiers, of studying strategy and tactics, he sees a chance of achieving what he thinks is his proper place in the scheme of things...

"Katt," asked the Captain, "how are your rockets?"

"Ready, Captain," replied the Reaction Engineer. "They are always ready. My fuel tanks were refilled, as you know, only twenty years ago, and the only consumption since then has been for the annual tests."

"Claver, in the unlikely event of our being ordered to send down a landing party before the arrival of the Main Fleet, how are your boat provisions?"

"All boats are fully stocked," said the Purser. "As always."

She looks, thought Rogerez, like a plump, competent housewife in the old stories—and that, with any luck at all, is what she will be soon, with her own little home to worry about and not a ship...

"Rogerez," Maris went on, "I suppose that your records are up to date?"

"They are, sir."

"Then get them transmitted to the flagship for recording, and make it, from now on, a half-daily routine. Crandell—is all your equipment in good order?"

"It is, Captain."

"Keep it so. The Commodore must be kept informed of everything. *Everything.*"

"How much can we tell the people, Captain?" asked Claver. "I realise the dangers of raising false hopes—but there has been considerable despondency of late."

"You can tell them," said Maris, "that we have found our new world. You can tell them, too, that we may have to fight for it."

"WE shall have to fight," said Rogerez.

"Put me in the picture," said Suset. "Nobody ever tells us anything in Hydroponics. That bitch Pamel knows what's going on, but it'd break her heart to pass on information. What's the use of having a husband who's Chronicler if I can't get inside information?"

"This *is* inside information," said Rogerez. "For some reason

the Old Man's decided to keep it secret. This is rather too big for him to handle, and he's waiting for instructions from the Commodore.

"As you know, we're in an orbit around the third planet. It's all that Astrophysics said it was—mass, atmosphere, climate and all the rest just right. But it's inhabited. We can see the city lights gleaming from the night hemisphere. Crandell has been able to pick up what seem to be radio broadcasts—voices talking in some odd language, weird music.

This much we know for certain—these people have electricity and they have radio. It's fairly certain that they haven't space flight—there're no signs of colonisation on their satellite—but, even so, their technological level is uncomfortably high. They may have atomic power—the scientists are still trying to make up their minds about that."

"What harm can it do if the people *do* know?"

"Plenty. If the Commodore decides to carry on without making a landing, an attempt at conquest, think of the disappointment. There might be mutiny, even. The technique for handling such a situation has to be worked out."

"I've a good mind," she flared, "to go out into the alleyways, the public rooms, and shout what you've told me throughout the ship."

"As wife of the Chronicler," he told her, "you've taken the oath of loyalty and secrecy."

"This is more important than any oath!" she snapped.

"It is not."

The lights flickered.

"What was that?" she demanded.

"Crandell's taking some more recordings of the native radio signals," he said. "They've had to switch off the meteor screen."

"Isn't that dangerous?"

"No. The chances of our being struck are infinitesimal."

The lights went out.

Rogerez realised that he was on the deck, with Suset in his arms. He was deafened by the concussions that had slammed through the huge hull, heard only faintly the thudding shut of airtight doors, the thin, high scream of escaping atmosphere. Somebody was whispering—it

was, he realised, the bulkhead speaker.

"Spacesuits... Put on your spacesuits... The ship is holed..." Another voice was heard. "There aren't enough, you fool! Attention, all! Attention, all! This is the Chief Officer. The Captain is dead. I am in command. The ship has been badly damaged. All navigation personnel will report to Control, all engineering personnel to the engineroom. The rest of you stay in your cabins and dormitories and prepare for landing. Prepare for landing. There will be brief period of weightlessness when the ship's revolution about her axis is halted; weight will return with deceleration. Secure everything. Secure yourselves."

Rogerez got unsteadily to his feet, pulled Suset to hers. Together, groping blindly in the darkness, they found the bunk, fell into it, strapped themselves in. They heard the roar as the rockets were fired, felt the dizzyness that came when the rotation slowed and halted, when centrifugal force no longer played the part of gravity.

Then, after what could have been either centuries or seconds, weight returned as the ship shook to the blasting of the rockets.

"Deceleration," said Rogerez.

"We're going down," came Kane's voice from the speaker.

Again the rockets fired, and again. There was the whine of the gyroscopes as the ship was turned, there was the thin, barely heard keening of the first tenuous wisps of atmosphere along her sides. There was the screaming roar, the ear-piercing whistle, as the air through which they were rushing found the holes punctured in the sleekness by the meteor swarm.

The ship was tilting, tilting, and Rogerez was afraid until he realised that what had been down could no longer be down, that Kane was turning her again so that she was approaching the planetary surface stern first, dropping down and down the long column of fire of her exhausts. Creaking, protesting, the long untried mechanism of the bunk adjusted itself to the change of conditions. Somewhere children were crying and a man was swearing.

The roar of the rockets was

steady now, drowning all other noises. More frightening than any sound was the shuddering of the ship. She was old, thought Rogerez, and the metal of her parts must, over the centuries, have crystallised. She was old, and the damage caused by the meteor swarm must have weakened her still further.

He tried to visualise the scene in Control—Kane and his officers intent over their instruments, the body of the Captain flung carelessly and unregarded in some corner.

Was it in daylight that they were coming down, he wondered, or was it at night? Was it clear air that they were dropping through, or cloud and storm?

One of the rockets was faltering, stammering. Suset cried out in fear as the ship tilted again. Rogerez held her tightly to him. He was muttering to himself, "Fire, you bastard! Fire, you bastard!" Another rocket cut out—and the ship righted.

"If we could only see what was happening!" cried Suset.

"We can guess," said Rogerez. "We're coming down on six jets instead of eight. Kane had to cut out one of the good ones to counterbalance the bad one."

Again there was the uneven, terrifying hammering. Again the ship tilted. Again she righted—and the diminution of the rockets' thunder was more frightening than the tilting had been.

"Control here," came Kane's voice. "We are coming down too fast for a safe landing. I am trying to bring her down in what appears to be a body of calm water. Be ready to throw off your safety belts the moment we touch. The ship is badly holed and will not stay afloat for long. Get ready to abandon ship as soon as we touch!"

Rogerez remembered how, at every council meeting, there had been those who had maintained that the space occupied by the ship's swimming pool could be put to much better use. He was glad that they had never been able to carry their point.

SHE hit, not too hard, and there was a great hissing and bubbling as her incandescent

exhausts boiled the water around her. She went down, and down—and then, swaying gently, floated to the surface. Rogerez unsnapped the buckles of the belt holding Suset and himself to the bunk. He jumped down on to what had been a bulkhead and was now the deck. He managed to open the sliding door.

There were dim emergency lights burning in the alleyway outside, and they were shining on the crowds of people making their way to the axial shaft.

There was little panic—but there was a determination to get out of the ship as soon as possible. Rogerez knew that should he or Suset fall they would never be able to get up again.

He took her hand and tucked it in the waistband of his trunks. All they could do thereafter was go with the crowd.

The alleyway had been crowded, but the axial shaft was almost jammed. Rogerez and Suset were pushed into it by the crush behind them, then went up it almost without touching the ladder rungs.

Below them there were gurglings and splashings, sounds that told of the encroachment of water into the ship. There was an occasional cry, an occasional c u r s e. Somewhere, with idiot persistence, a speaker was repeating, "Abandon ship. Abandon ship."

Then Rogerez and Suset were at the forward airlock. There was no holding back, no chance of a pause to evaluate, to decide upon a plan of action. They were swept through the little compartment by the press of bodies behind them until, in a matter of seconds, the deck was gone from beneath their feet and they were falling.

The Chronicler g l i m p s e d grey sky and tall, incredibly tall, trees looming through the mist as he fell—and then all was blotted out by the water.

He fought, viciously, to free himself from the entwining arms and legs of those who had fallen with him, after him. He broke surface at last, coughing and spluttering. He looked around him frantically until he saw Suset's pale hair and paler face. Together they struck out for the dark line of the shore.

KANE, aided by Deel and Claver, called the roll. Rogerez—his stylus and notebook were little the worse for their immersion—wrote down the figures and, after them, *We were lucky. Seven men—including the Captain—five women and sixteen children died in the meteor shower. Three men, eight women and six children are missing, presumably drowned, after the landing. Over a thousand of our ship's company has survived...*

"Lucky?" demanded Deel, who was holding the hand lamp while Rogerez wrote. "Lucky, you say? All of our heavy weapons have been lost with the ship—with them we could have destroyed a city." He turned to Kane. "As for you—why couldn't you have landed near one of their cities? Why couldn't you have landed on solid ground?"

"If I had," replied Kane, "we'd have been lucky to have had ten survivors—and the people of the city could have finished us off with ease. I got us here. I did my job. You're in charge now, soldier. Let's see what you can do."

"All right," snapped Dee. "All non-military officers will get the people formed into a column, at the head of which I shall place my own men. We shall march—" he consulted his pocket compass—"west. I suppose that this planet has got a magnetic field, Kane."

"It has."

"All right. We march west, away from the lake. We must get out of this damned jungle as soon as possible—for all we know it's teeming with night predators. At sunrise, which shouldn't be far off, we halt to take stock."

"Why not wait until sunrise before marching?"

"Because I say so," snapped Deel. "Get the people organised and we'll make a start."

"What about a rearguard?" asked Kane.

"Are you trying to teach me my business?" demanded the soldier.

Nevertheless, Rogerez noted, he made arrangements for both a rearguard and flanking parties.

Whistles sounded, and the long column began its march. The Chronicler, with Suset, took his place with Kane at

the head of the civilians. As he walked he looked around him, trying to make out as much as possible in the dim, misty light. He could see little beyond the tall, straight stems, many times the height of a man, between which they threaded their way. Now and again there were other, thicker, trunks and the tops of the growths supported by them were lost in the mist. Roots, like cables over the ground, made going difficult.

Ahead of the column Deel was blowing his whistle—a series of short, urgent blasts. Kane repeated the signal with his whistle; it was repeated again by the other officers. There were cries of alarm and apprehension as the march halted.

"There's something there," whispered Kane to Rogerez. "Do you hear it?"

There was something there, ahead, something that crashed through the jungle towards them, something big.

Rogerez saw it in the glare of the soldiers' hand lamps. It was huge, and spiny, and the mouth in the long, pointed face was open, showing sharp, yellow teeth. Its black eyes glared at them hungrily.

"Fire!" shouted Deel.

The rattle of the hand guns was deafening. Blinded, the beast reared up, its taloned fore paws scrabbling at its ruined eyes. "Fire!" shouted Deel again. The bullets tore into its soft under-belly. It screamed, deafeningly, fell on its side, flattening the tall, spearlike growths. It screamed again and jerked convulsively.

It was dead.

Walking slowly, Deel came back to confer with Kane.

"This was supposed to be a civilised world," he said bitterly. "How do you account for—*that?*"

"Even on our own planet," replied Kane, "there were vast areas of primitive jungle at the time of the Invasion. You, yourself, said that we should be on our guard against night predators."

"I didn't expect anything quite so *big,*" said the soldier. "I didn't expect something that it would take all my fire power to dispose of."

"You disposed of it," said the Chief Officer.

"Yes—but ammunition isn't

unlimited. I hope that anything else we meet will be of a size that we can handle with our machetes."

Rogerez left them talking, walked with Suset to look at the dead animal. He didn't like what he saw. The spiny body armour suggested that it must have enemies bigger and fiercer than itself. He examined one of the smaller spikes. His hand would just fit comfortably around the base of it.

"Deel!" he shouted.

"Yes, Rogerez?"

"Come here a minute, will you?"

"What is it?" asked the soldier.

"First of all," said Rogerez, "there must be bigger animals than this one around. It's built for defense rather than for attack. We can assume that it feeds on beasts smaller than itself—such as ourselves. It can supply us with weapons against such creatures..."

"How?"

"Don't you ever read military history? Pikes, man, pikes!"

THE sun was up, but the mist persisted. Looming gigantic on either side, towering high above what he had called, in his notes, the spear trees, were other growths, seeming to reach to the very sky itself. Ahead of them was the vague silhouette of what could only be a mountain—but a mountain constructed on improbably geometrical lines, in whose sheer sides gleamed enormous sheets of some highly polished material that reflected the almost level rays of the sun.

"Volcanic," grunted Kane, and Rogerez agreed—but, in his mind, he wasn't sure.

Then they were out of the jungle and crossing a wide, bare clearing, stumbling and slipping a little on the coarse gravel. Deel ordered a detour—he did not, he said, like the looks of tunnels that run down into the earth at a steep angle. There was something artificial about them, he said.

Suddenly, the nearer of the tunnels erupted a swarm of glistening red bodies that deployed rapidly over the plain, that closed in on the advance guard with a pincer movement. Rogerez was shocked to see that they were not humanoid, that they ran on all six of their

jointed legs, that their weapons were their vicious, laterally-hinged jaws.

Calmly, with deliberation, the soldiers were firing—at first. Then, in spite of Deel's shouts, an element of hysteria crept into their fighting—these natives were so hard to kill, pressed on to the attack with legs missing and half their bodies shot away.

Kane took charge of the rest of the column.

"Children in the centre!" he bellowed. "The rest of you—form a tight ring! Use your pikes!"

The manouver was accomplished, although not without confusion, not without casualties. Kane was dead, his head ripped from his shoulders. Claver was dead, her body cut in two. Deel, Rogerez noted as he fended off attack with his pike, was down. The air was heavy with the odour of spilled blood and the acrid stench of the ichor flowing from the bodies of the natives.

The worst of it was that there were so many of them. In a seemingly inexhaustible stream they flowed from their tunnels, rushed to the attack over the bodies of their comrades. The soldiers had exhausted their ammunition, were fighting with machetes and spears. The handful of them who survived retreated to the main body.

Rogerez was bleeding, his shirt ripped from his body by a serrated claw. It seemed that he had been fighting for an eternity, that all he had ever known, ever would know, was the thrusting of the point of his pike into the soft joints of body armour, between gaping, clashing mandibles. Beside him Suset had lost her spear—it had been bitten clean in two—and was wielding a machete taken from a dead soldier.

Rogerez realised dimly that it had been all of five minutes since he had used his spear. He looked around him. The tunnel mouths gaped black and empty. On the bloodstained gravel were the bodies of men and women, the bodies of the enemy. The human corpses were still. Those of the natives were not—clawed legs twitched jerkily, sharp mandibles still opened and shut viciously.

"Rogerez," somebody was

saying, "what do we do now?"

"Ask Deel," he said. "Ask Kane."

But Deel was dead, and with him his junior officers and his sergeants. Kane was dead, and the Purser was dead, and the Engineers had died during the landing. As Chronicler, Rogerez ranked as an officer. In the past he had enjoyed the privileges of rank, he had never thought that he would have to accept the responsibilities.

He said, "Find all the hand lights that are still working. Collect all the machetes and the shorter spears. We are going down into the city."

"But the natives..."

"We'll never be safe until we have a fortified place of our own. The natives must have sent all their soldiers out against us. Killing the rest should be easy."

IT wasn't easy—but it was not as hard as Rogerez had anticipated. There was fighting in the tunnels and passages, and there were more casualties, but they were not heavy ones. It was in the very heart of the city that the stiffest resistance was encountered—and there, in a huge chamber, twenty guards put up a desperate and stubborn defense. They went down at last, hacked to pieces by the machetemen. Rogerez looked at the gross bulk of the being whom they had defended so grimly. He looked at the great flaccid body, at the faceted eyes that glinted in the light of the hand lamps, that glared into his.

"Kill it," he ordered.

The pikes drove home.

"What now?" asked Suset.

"This will be our headquarters," said Rogerez. To his men he said, "Drag that thing out of here, into that side tunnel. Pass word that I want all the natives' bodies dragged out and buried, and the bodies of our own people brought inside before some vile scavenger finds them. We'll make a grave of one of the tunnels.

"Then I want parties to go through the city to dispose of any survivors and to report to me on the discovery of any records or artifacts, or stores or foodstuffs..."

"We've seen no artifacts," said Suset. "There's no artificial lighting, even. What about

the city lights we saw from our orbit?"

"Civilisation and savagery can exist together on the same planet," said Rogerez. "We landed among savages."

He sat on the ground, his back against the wall of the chamber. He was tired, and his wounds were painful. He was thankful for the pain, it kept him awake. He was able to acknowledge the reports of various parties as they told him of the discovery of gardens of fungi, of the finding of a chamber in which, in silken bags, were loathsome beings that seemed to be the young of the natives. He nibbled a piece of fungus brought to him by one of the foraging parties, pronounced it edible; it was not unlike the yeast from the ship's vats.

At last, with affairs organised to his satisfaction, he felt justified in ordering a general stand down. Sentries had been posted and arrangements made to pass messages by word of mouth through the tunnels and passages. Nothing further could be attempted, he knew, until all hands had been refreshed by sleep. Thankfully, he himself sank into unconsciousness with Suset by his side.

He was awakened, just before the end, by a confused bawling. As in a dream he heard the words, screamed rather than shouted, "Like mountains! Like mountains walking!" There was a dreadful thudding overhead that threatened to crush the underground city.

And then the scalding water, sweeping through tunnels and chambers, seeping into every last crevice, finished conclusively what had been begun by shipwreck and battle.

THE man cursed as the spines of the dead hedgehog pricked his ankle. He stooped to examine the little body.

"Hello!" he said. "I wonder what did this."

"Never mind the hedgehog," said his wife. "It's those dratted ants that I'm *after!" She stood with the empty kettle in her hand, looking down with satisfaction at the steaming earth around the nest.*

"There'll be more of them," said her husband pessimistically.

THE END

BLOOD BY TRANSIT

by HARLAN ELLISON

The teleport-adapter could achieve an instantaneous transportation of matter, even between planets. But only under certain conditions, dangerous conditions

OLD, old, and older than he might have been on Earth. Old, so that his eyes had sunk to blue-pocketed glints, and the skin around his mouth had yellowed. Hair that was yellow-white with age, and toothless gums that snapped shut with the ferocity of a loggerhead shark. Hands more like bamboo rakes than hands. A body thinned and drawn in and emaciated, till it seemed he might be held up before a light, and the light show through the skin.

He lay in the big bed, dwarfed by the huge pillows and the expanse of white, starched sheets. His breath came shallowly, and a pulmote disgorged its silvered tubing from his chest. Yet, his eyes were live, and biting, and there was a fierceness about him. An aura that demanded attention, that literally warned Death away.

Fifteen men surrounded the bed. It was a peculiar thing that the nearer the bed, the more expensive the clothing each man wore. In many ways, it was an indication of rank, of servitude in degree. These were the men who ruled Tri-Planet Monopolies, Consolidated. They watched the man in the bed. They cautiously studied the palsied movements of his hands, the twitter of his face. In many ways they resembled mourners—before the funeral.

They listened carefully to the man, and in the rear of the room lectroskribes hummed softly, taking down his every

word, inscribing his inflection and his modulation with easily-converted figures.

The room focused down on the man, and the attention stiffened as he spoke; he spoke to one man—tall, thin, a businesslike hairline moustache, alert bearing and sharp green eyes—but all listened.

"I don't care *how* many have to die, Pennseville. I want that blood! I'm dying myself, Pennseville, and I'm not concerned with anyone else but myself now. Can you understand that...can you know what I'm talking about? No, you're not dying...you *can't* know. But hear this, Pennseville, if I die without getting that blood, I'll make certain Tri-Planet goes to hell b e f o r e any of you inherit a bloc of shares; I'll make certain Tri-Planet falls into the hands of receivers...with direct orders that none of you remain with the organization! I want that b l o o d, I need that blood, and I don't care if you have to kill every man on Earth to get it for me!"

As though the long speech had drained away what little energy was in his body, the ancient man slipped back against the pillows, breathing raggedly, fingers clutching, face white and eyes closed.

A white-smocked medic detached himself from the group, shouldered aside the man known as Pennseville, bringing a ripe flicker of anger to the man's face, and bent to take the old man's pulse.

"He's weakening fast," the medic said over his shoulder, voice filled with thinly-disguised emotion. His was a job, to keep this man alive, but he knew what his word meant to these other masters of industry.

Pennseville began to turn, to l e a v e the room, the stink of death in his nostrils. "If you're going to teep that blood in," the medic added ruefully, "you'd damned well better do it fast. Type OO-Neg is the only thing that'll bring him around, and if he lasts another day it'll be a miracle."

Pennseville was at the door, his hand on the knob, as the old man rose from his nesting. A shaking hand came up, and the skeletal finger aimed at

Pennseville straightly.

The old man croaked, "Get it, man, or I'll see you broken!" He slipped back exhaustedly.

The old man was Prescott Glowey, the founder of Tri-Planet Monopolies, Consolidated, the man who owned it one hundred per cent, who owned these men, half the planet Mars and all the raw industry of Mars-Earth-Venus. He was, indeed, the wealthiest man in the Solar System. He was on Mars, where he would remain till he died.

He was dying.

S. HARVEY, Elbert St., John Cargrove, Nathan Mibile and the man known as Pennseville retired to the lounge. The Mars home of Prescott Glowey was a sprawling affair, covering twenty acres from one end to the other, with a completely outfitted research center, a health farm, a business block and communications center. Glowey had System-wide enemies who wondered how he was able to keep his finger on the pulse of the Tri-Planets. The twenty acres of home was one method. And all this, all this too, would fall into the hands of those men who took over after Glowey died—or stepped down.

Though the last was unthinkable, for Glowey loved power too much to ever delegate it to underlings, the men under him knew all this would slip from their grasp if he died without getting what he wanted.

What he wanted was to live.

But since this was impossible, since the mutated form of Bright's Disease that was granulating the old man's kidneys was inching him closer to the grave each day, the next best thing (to a man determined to clutch Life to its end instant) was a few extra months. A few months provided by a case of blood. Not plasma, for plasma would not work in this advanced situation, but raw, vital, warm blood.

Type OO-Negative.

Available only on Earth.

And unshippable in the needed state by rocket.

Blood was a tender cargo. An easily bruised, and an eas-

ily r u i n e d commodity. It could not be shipped by any means in daily use. But there *was* one way to ship it.

But shipping meant death to the shipper.

Pennseville slumped his long form into a pneumatic relaxer that slid around him soft as a whisper. He punched a code for brandy Alexander and waited thoughtfully for ten s e c o n d s as the autotend whipped it up. He reached out his thin-fingered hand automatically as the panel in the relaxer slid back to feed him his brink.

Then he sipped from the snifter, and stared cooly at the men standing before him. As second in command to Glowey, his word was almost as powerful as the old man's during this illness. They stood waiting for an invitation to sit.

None was extended.

"Let's up-ship on this," Pennseville said slowly, swirling the violet-shaded brew in his snifter. "Let's review it all and spot our position."

The other three shifted uncomfortably.

"Give me what you know on the teeper, Mibile," he said, staring down into the glass.

N a t h a n M i b i l e, dark-skinned, intense head of Technical Development for Tri-Planet cleared his throat awkwardly, prepared one of his usual a p o l o g e tic openings: "Now I'm not too clear on some of this" or "Sorry I don't have the figures right at my fingertips, but..." or "Well, I know most of this only from reports."

Pennseville cut him short before he could speak. "Boil it down and serve it up straight, Mibile."

THE dark man waved his spade-shaped hands awkwardly for a moment, as though feeling his ground, and said, "Well, I'm sure you fellows know they came up with the teleport-adaptor about four years ago, back on Earth at General Westinghouse. They named it the 'teep' and the name's stuck.

"They tried instantaneous transportation across great distances and small, and they came up with n o t h i n g. I'm sure you fellows know that." He stopped, uncertainly.

Pennseville urged him on. "Yes, yes, all that is clear water, Mibile. I want the latest developments. Let's have some fresh meat on the table."

Mibile nodded his head briskly, launched back into the account. "Well, the teep was used to send messages, without human intervention, and they never arrived. No one ever saw them again, but there were reports that one message turned up on Mount Everest, near a resort lodge, and another was found in the belly of a king salmon off the coast of Nova Scotia.

"Then somebody decided to try animals. So they sent a chimpanzee with a message in a plastic vial strapped to its neck through. They had the teep poles set up one in the general labs of G.W. and the other in Cairo, Egypt.

"The message got through, and the chimp got through, but the chimp was dead. Its insides were scrambled. So it seemed the only way a message could get through by itself was attached to a human being or an animal, which made it totally unfeasible for commercial or even wartime use."

He stopped, and Pennseville punched for another brandy Alexander. "Is that all?"

Mibile added, "Well, during the Colorado Uprising, some men got boxed in, and the only way they could get a message out to their forces in Mexico before they were overwhelmed was to use the teep. So a man went through, with a message.

"It got through, and he got through, but it was the same story. Only worse. From what I hear—and this is strictly by report, fellows—he was squashed.

"So nobody knows what the teep will do, precisely, except messages can go through unhampered, but human beings are killed."

Pennseville sat moodily swirling his drink. Staring at the heavy duocene rug. Thinking.

"Harvey, did you send that message yesterday precisely as I worded it to you?"

S. Harvey, heavyset and slow-speaking head of Tri-Planet Communications nodded. "They packaged up the raw blood— Type OO-Negative—and put it aboard the

fastest s p a c e r in the docks. But even in overjet, it'll take the ship two weeks to get here. And even then the blood will probably be useless."

Pennseville bit his full lower lip. "We've got to—"

The combox hidden in the ceiling erupted the voice of the medic: "Mr. Glowey wishes Mr. Cargrove's presence immediately." It clicked out, but even before the final word had been concluded, little John Cargrove was nervously out of the room, at Prescott Glowey's demand.

They all waited silently. Twenty minutes later Cargrove re-entered the room.

"I re-scribed his will," he said, shaking his head. "The old man is certainly bitter. The will is set up so we get everything he owns, only if he gets the blood before he dies. If he goes under without it, we get nothing and Tri-Planet falls to receivers."

He slumped into a relaxer without asking Pennseville's permission, then started nervously as he realized what he had done. He made m o v e to rise, but the somber Pennse- v i l l e motioned him down. Pennseville looked up at the three intently.

"We've got to try a chimp with the blood a t t a c h e d to him," he said.

They stared across the room at the two swirling poles, the steel shining dome, the grid and oscillators, the frequency pile and jamming rods of the unused teep.

WHEN the chimp came through, they knew it was no use. They knew they would have to use a human being.

The poles s h i v e r e d, the dome turned transparent, the h u m m i n g increased till it seemed the inner lining of their s k u l l s would rip apart, the jamming poles turned blue hot, and the grid vibrated. Then there was a foggy fogginess on the landing s t a g e, and it appeared.

A monkey's paw, a bit of plascelsior packing material, and a tiny pyramidal pile of blue paint.

The blood had been lost, the animal was gone. The between-space teep had been too much.

Pennseville was wordlessly elected to tell Glowey.

He entered the room only

by invitation. First from the medic, then from Glowey himself.

The room was dark now, and he could see Glowey only b e c a u s e the little man was propped high on his white background of pillows. The tycoon was so close to death it could be felt in the room, sifting back and forth, wafting in and out of his pores like some noxious fluid. The old man shivered once, and beckoned.

Pennseville sat down next to the bed. "We tried a chimpanzee, sir, but it d i d n ' t get through."

The old man stiffened. "You fool! You stupid fool, I knew a monkey w o u l d n ' t work! Haven't I..." his voice faltered, and the next words were mere rasps, "...I been trying to steal that device from G.W. for two years? Don't you think I know what will work? Didn't I tell you only a man w o u l d work?"

"I've been conducting experiments, you fool! We've tried men and women before. Women get lost. Men get through."

Pennseville inserted, "Yes, but Mr. Glowey sir, I've heard the men are—are—"

"Certainly, they are, you young imbecile!" he nearly shouted, and his throat tendons s t o o d out in raw relief. "Certainly they are warped and twisted and burned and puddled and any other damned t h i n g you like to name! But they get through, and whatever comes through *with* them gets through!

"I said I didn't care how many men have to die, now get out there and teep me that blood, or I swear by all that's holy..."

He s l u m p e d back unconscious, and the heavily-muscled medic lifted Pennseville from the chair relaxer, shoved him roughly toward the door.

"Y o u ' r e s a p p i n g his strength. Instead of arguing with the man, you'd better get out there and do as he asks!"

He s h o v e d Pennseville through the door and palmed it locktite. Pennseville stood outside the door shivering.

That damned civil servant, he cursed the medic. *He must be getting a s h a r e of the old man's will to testify to the inquest whether or not the blood was received. He probably* wants *us to fail!*

Pennseville went back to the other three in the lounge, still staring at the ruined mass that had come through the teep. He stared at them silently for a m o m e n t, and they stared back.

Abruptly he smashed his hand against one of the floor-to-ceiling decorative p a n e l s, and screamed at them:

"Don't stare at me! Don't stare at me! You'd have to tell *me,* if you were in my place! All right, all right, it's murder! It's just murder, but everything is tied up with that sonofabitch and his blood! It's murder, but we've got to get a man!

"Send the message Harvey. Send it! Tell them to offer five figure bonuses if need be, but get that man teeped!

"Teep that man!"

The first man didn't come through at all. Just his belt buckle and one eyelid.

The second man made it... partially. What got through was wet and pungent. They were sick all over the lounge, but the atomeck cleaned it up quickly, and there was no trace. And no blood.

The seventh man brought the blood with him. It was imbedded in his chest, carton and all. When they extracted the carton, praying it was all over, and knowing they could never look at each other straightly again, the blood was cold and hard. Brick hard.

THE twelfth man made it with the blood carton intact. He was dead, sliced neatly in h a l f and his organs exposed at their severed roots, as though he had been sliced by some fantastically-thin blade that had left no blood. Except the blood in the carton.

"T h a n k God, thank God, thank God..." Harvey cried, his face filthy with the tracks made by his tears. "Thank God it got through. It's all over. We can stop, we can stop."

But they all knew it was over for them. Even if the old man lived, they wanted no part of Tri-Planet now. It was surprising to each of them how the drive of all their lives, how the push and the desire to get to the top could be washed away so quickly. A day and a half was all it had been, but an eternity had swept past

them, leaving them crumpled and broken.

They took the carton, all four of them, into the old man's suite, and set it down on the table. Glowey was in a state of semi-coma, yet he seemed to sense they had brought him life in a plain carton. "Sit...me...up..." he demanded, struggling against the monstrous weight of the sheets and the pillows. The medic propped him, and went back to rip open the top of the carton.

The four men watched as the medic ripped the cardboard back, and lifted out one of the vials of raw blood, Type OO-Negative.

"He is as g o o d as dead, if this doesn't work," the medic said, fitting a needle to the head of a syringe. "But this will be enough to stop the granulation. This b l o o d was the key, gentlemen.

"Mr. Glowey, you'll live!"

He shoved the needle down through the plastoid top of the vial, drawing the blood up into the hypodermic from behind the opaque glassite of the vial.

He drew it up, speaking over his shoulder, "This will add another ten years to your life, Mr. Glowey. This is the key, the secret of..."

He stopped, and stared at the filled syringe. He raised it to the light, and stared dumbly. The four men inched closer and looked at the clear glass syringe, and knew it had butchered them inside for nothing, knew they were marked men—inside, where it counted the most—for nothing.

The b l o o d had gotten through, all r i g h t, but it had suffered as had the men who died being teeped. It had gotten through, b u t Prescott Glowey would die, nonetheless.

The blood was green.

THE END

Continued from back cover

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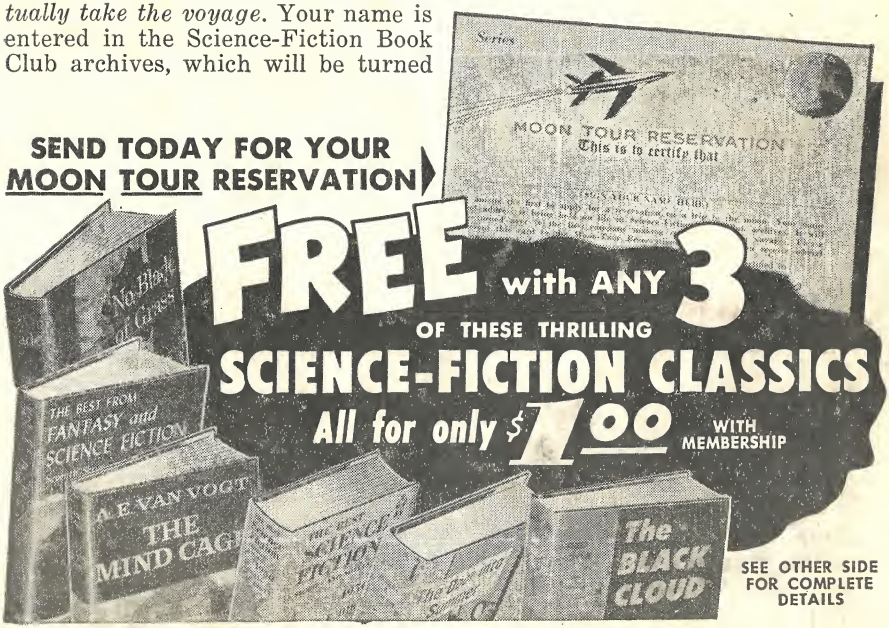

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